

The Shinzahou Chronicles Vol 4: Genbu No Takara

VraieEsprit

Fushigi Yuugi

Complete



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VraieEsprit

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Summary

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Description

The location of Genbu's Shinzahou is unknown and Hikari's party head to Hokkan, unaware there is a spy in their midst. What secrets lie in a snowy tribal mountain retreat, and will discovering them cost Hyoushin his life? Decisions of loyalty for Aoi and Maichu as the real enemy begins to show his face. And what treasure has the old circus slave entrusted to Tasuki's daughter?

Chapter 1

The Shinzahou Chronicles *Introduction and Disclaimer*

“Itami sae ‘chikara ni suru’ sou chikatte, ne?”

We’ll even turn our pain into power — wasn’t that our vow?

(Chichiri, Aoi Jiyuu, Shiroy Nozomi)

So this is part four of the Shinzahou Chronicles.

Cookies for anyone who’s got this far :D It’s appreciated :D Especially large cookies for **Gauri92**, whose diligent reviewing always makes Vraie happy :D

So things got a bit intense at times in the last story. I’m not sure how people feel about Jin’s demise — to be honest with you, I hated the fact that he died myself. But in order to further and continue the plot, he had to... sometimes it’s hard to sacrifice a character even knowing you need to do it. I hope noone is too put off from reading by the fact he’s dead. (Or maybe you’re happy he died, though — I might be the only one who was at all fond of Jin after all!)

For anyone who does have any vague fondness for the self-sacrificial bandit — he makes a guest appearance in the prologue to this story ;)

By now, Amefuri’s true identity has been properly revealed, even if not to all the characters involved. I wanted a Seishi who broke the rules — who resented his situation and who would let that resentment go to extreme lengths. Obviously, since Watase Yuu hasn’t given any kind of official identity or background for Amefuri yet, this is all speculative on my part. However I’d like to think that he and Toroki are believable characters, and as time goes on, their connection to one another (and Toroki’s fateful prophesy!) becomes more and more significant.

Things are picking up pace again, basically. Aoiketsu is spying in the south, but it’s not as simple a mission as either he or his people back home think it will be. There’s an element of treachery and deceit in this volume, as Kutou’s antagonist shows proper claws for the first time. If you haven’t worked out what’s going to happen yet I won’t spoil it for you, but I think there will be lots of clues to it in this story. Oh yes, and the truth about Aoiketsu’s identity will also be firmly

revealed in this story, too. Though I think (in fact I know) that some people have already guessed it — the facts of it and how it came to be will somewhat be explained in this tale. ((I think)).

So they're all heading North once again, this time to face the Genbu Shichi Seishi who guard the Shinzahou.

Although it's proving to be a lot harder to interfere with destiny than Hikari or her companions ever fully imagined...

This part is called Genbu no Takara — Genbu's Treasure. Obviously the Shinzahou is Genbu's treasure, but if you consider that Hokkan is the land of Genbu, there is another 'treasure' in the Northern territories whose existence/survival is about to become a little bit more significant. She has already been introduced fleetingly. Yep, I'm talking about Hyoushin's sister Lirayi — whose survival from slavery is about to make life very complicated for the Kutou Commander!!

You may or may not have noticed, by the way, that the Yuugi song quotes that start each story have some kind of bearing on the story. Last time the quote was in Jin's honour. This time — Chichiri's quote — it might be Shishi and Hikari's overcoming Jin's loss, or it might be something else completely. There are a lot of characters in this segment for whom the quote may apply... I'll let everyone else decide which it fits most :)

Brief note — Regarding the Meihi Tribe (Ignore if easily bored...)

There's a lot of Meihi-ish stuff going on in this story — including Hyoushin's past. So this babble to come now does have some relevance :) I realised when writing this story that Lirayi and Lilaihi could sound similar when spoken, even though I don't think of them that way. So far as I'm concerned, anyhow, Lilaihi would be pronounced "Lila-ee-hee" and Lirayi as 'Li-rah-yee'. I did originally consider writing them separated — Lila-Ihi and Li-Ra-Yi — but I thought that looked a little odd...:S Plus it complicated the way the names were meant to be (ie I wanted "Rayi" to be the Meihi word for 'hope'). I also wanted Meihi to be very different (and softer sounding) than the language the characters are speaking. (Chinese Japanese. Let's not even go there...) So...(geekish Vraie), that's why they ended up the way they were. (I hear the character's names when I write them, and that just seemed to be what came up. LOL). I imagine written Meihi language to work similarly to written Chinese or Japanese in that they're comprised of characters — so Lila and Ihi would be two characters, Li and Rayi two, etc. (Yes, I've achieved new levels of geekdom... this is pushing even the Kii language theory in my Tenchi Muyo arc — can I help it if language interests me??)

Continuing on that theme, although I expect Kintsusei and co refer to the tribe as “May-hee”, Hyoushin and his people would probably say it “Meh-ee-hee.”. (Yes, the second part of Meihi and the second part of Lilaihi are intentionally the same. I’m not just uninventive.)

By the way, I think the Meihi wouldn’t have actual family names, although Hyoushin does have one to go with his Chinese name and this will be referenced in this story. He calls himself Hyoushin of the East, after all — the best way I could find to put that into character name form was 東氷心 (Tou Hyoushin) (*Woot, fanfic characters with name Kanji. Another point on the geek scale for Vraie. But pretty much all my characters have names that mean something after all...*).

(Tou 東 is the character for “East” and is the second character in the country name “Kutou” for that reason ;)).

In case of any confusion — Meihi words (and sounds) don’t mean anything in any real language. They’re just the product of my overly fertile imagination ;)

Disclaimer version 2.1

Watase Yuu is the owner of FY and the characters, not me!! Any added characters (ie Hyoushin, Aoiketsu, Shishi, Jin, etc) are of my own creation, except for when they tie in with Watase Yuu’s world — they are based on concepts and frameworks entirely unrelated to any other source. (This includes all reference/character biography/fleshing, background and detail given to the Byakko Seishi “Toroki” and “Amefuri” although the concept of Byakko Seishi belongs to Watase Yuu.)

My interpretation of Toroki and Amefuri are unique to me and are not to be duplicated in any other source without permission. The Meihi tribe, their language and appearance are entirely of my creation also, and ditto goes for them in terms of fan-fiction re-production.

(And the same goes for any other OCs I happen to have thrown into the mix!)

第四卷：玄武の宝 Volume Four: Genbu no Takara

Prologue

Souun, Kounan-koku
Seven Years Earlier

“The city’s so busy today.”

Shishi cast a glance around her, her bronze eyes sparkling with excitement and anticipation. “It’s the festival, isn’t it, Papa? Everyone’s

come to Souun from all over Kounan — there must be a thousand people here!”

“Yes, an’ you shouldn’t be one of them, chibi.” Tasuki shot her a rueful grimace. “Your Ma’s goin’ to go mad when she finds out you were usin’ those tunnels to sneak out after me again. I’ve told you — you ain’t even a pint size bandit yet — you ain’t big enough to start roamin’ the countryside an’ I don’t want my head ripped off by your mother if she thinks I’ve been takin’ you on bandit business.”

“I just wanted to come.” Shishi pouted, putting her hands on her hips. “Jin’s come. Why can’t I? He’s only three years older’n me.”

“Jin’s a boy, lion cub.” Kouji reached across to ruffle her wild red hair playfully. “An’ even if that don’t matter to you, it’s a different matter when you’re stuck in the middle of a crowd o’ hostile bandits. Your Pa’s right — you ain’t big enough to be fightin’ villains. So pipe down a while, huh? At least grow into your sword before you start wantin’ to swing it around.”

Shishi’s expression darkened, and she folded her arms defiantly across her chest.

“If Jin can go so can I.” She said firmly. “We stick together.”

“Kashira, something’s happenin’ up ahead.” At that moment the young boy himself spoke up, excitement in his own eyes as he gestured to a gathering crowd in the centre of the town square. “I think some kind of performance is goin’ on — do you think it’s the circus that some of the other guys were talkin’ about?”

“Circus?” Shishi’s eyes widened with hope. “Papa, can we go see the circus? Please?”

“What do you think this is — a family day out?” Tasuki demanded, and Kouji laughed, amusement in his dark eyes.

“She’s got you wound around her finger, jus’ like her Ma.” He remarked playfully, and at this Tasuki sent his closest friend a warning glower. “Let the kid see the performers, Genrou. It won’t hurt, an’ besides, Anzu did this kind o’ thing once. The cub’s bound to be curious to know about it... you know that. It ain’t like she hasn’t heard stories.”

“We’re not here for that.” Tasuki reminded his companion, and Kouji shook his head.

“I know, but it ain’t like you’ll get a thing done with that one tagging along anyway.” He said wisely. “Look. I’ll take the guys an’ we’ll gather the supplies we need. You take Shishi an’ amuse her for a while... we’ll meet up back here in a while an’ it won’t be like we’ve wasted any time.”

"I suppose." Tasuki glanced at his daughter, then sighed, hoisting her small form up into his arms as he met her gaze head on. Shishi stared back at him with hopeful, eager bronze eyes that were so like his own and Tasuki frowned, knowing he was beaten.

"You are trouble." He said bluntly. "Goddamn women... even at this size, they're nothing but a hassle. God knows where you get it from, kid, runnin' around the place like a crazed loon — but okay. You win. I'll cut a deal with you. You don't tell your Ma that you were sneakin' out of the mountain, an' I won't tell her you did, either. Okay? We'll tell her I took you to see the circus... so long as you don't run out after us again, you understand? There'll be a time when you're old enough — but now ain't it, an' noone wants you killed."

Shishi eyed her father thoughtfully for a moment, seeing the flicker of wolfish affection that lurked beyond the serious expression on his face and she beamed, nodding her head as she wriggled down from his grip.

"I promise." She said solemnly. "I won't tell Okaa-san that I followed you."

"Jin, what do you want t'do?" Kouji cast the youngster a glance, and the boy frowned, clearly trying to decide between acting the grown up bandit and following his childish curiosity. Tasuki offered him a rueful grin.

"If you want, Jin, you can come help me keep Shishi under control." He suggested. "It might take two of us to stop her jumpin' in and tryin' to join the damn circus — I could use your help."

"All right." Jin's expression cleared, and from the relief in the boy's eyes, Tasuki knew he had made the right call. "I'll come help you, Kashira. I'll protect Shishi, just like you said."

"Then we'll see you in a while, Genrou." Kouji's eyes danced with amusement. "Good luck. That brat's just like you in every respect — so you'll damn well need it."

With that he was gone, and Tasuki glanced down at his daughter, meeting Shishi's eager, excited gaze with a startled one of his own.

"Like me, huh?" He murmured, and Shishi beamed, nodding her head.

"Okaa-san says so too." She agreed. "I'm just like Papa. An' I'm going to be Kashira too, when I grow up."

"Worry about the growin' up first, huh?" Tasuki rubbed his chin ruefully. "Babysittin' the cub at the town circus — shit, I've gone soft in the head. Some Kashira I am, if I can be run around like this by a brat of

seven years old.”

“I’ll be eight soon.” Shishi seemed unconcerned. “And that’s only two years off ten, which is what Jin is. Besides, nothing bad is gonna happen to me, right? You’re Kashira, right? I’ve seen you blaze up the Kaou-zan creeps when they come messin’ round on our mountain — noone’s gonna come cause trouble if you’re here.”

“That doesn’t mean Kashira wants to burn down Souun, you idiot.” Jin cuffed the young girl playfully and Shishi glared at him indignantly, a spark of anger in her bronze gaze.

“Don’t hit me!” She exclaimed. “Just because I’m smaller’n you doesn’t mean you’re better than me, Jin-kun! I’ll be stronger than you are one day — you wait and see! I’m gonna be Kashira an’ then you won’t be able to hit me like I’m just a little kid any more.”

“Providing you don’t get yourself killed first, either of you.” Tasuki grimaced at her. “Are we goin’ to see this act, then, or are we standin’ here? Shit, I swear if that bastard at Kaou-zan ever finds out I’m takin’ kids out on day trips...”

He trailed off, shaking his head, and Jin cast him a concerned look.

“Will it be a lot of trouble, Kashira, if they see us?” He wondered. “Are we going to have to fight Kaou-zan because we’re going to see the circus people perform?”

“I damn well hope not.” Tasuki responded frankly. “Come on, the pair of you. Else they’ll be clearin’ off an’ so will we. I don’t want to leave the mountain exposed wi’ just Anzu in charge for too long — which is why we don’t want to attract too much attention. So shut up, both o’ you. We’re here, an’ you’ll get your way, Shishi. Jus’ don’t kick up a fuss... okay?”

Shishi pulled a face, but she did not seem too displeased with the instruction, for she slipped her small fingers into her father’s brawny, sword-calloused fist and Jin darted ahead of them, finding gaps through the crowd for them to push through the gathering audience. As they reached the front of the melee, Shishi let out a delighted gasp and Tasuki grinned, nodding his head.

“Tumblers, jus’ like your ol’ ma was, before you started runnin’ her ragged round the mountain.” He said teasingly.

“Anzu-sama used to perform like that, Kashira?” Jin asked curiously, and Tasuki nodded.

“She and her sister were acrobats — better’n this pair, if my memory serves.” He agreed. “O’ course, she gave it up when she came to the

mountain, though. But she's still pretty agile now — s'why none o' those Kaou-zan bastards have ever laid their hands on her. They can't keep up with a former circus tumbler."

"That's why Okaa-san is Okaa-san." Shishi said decidedly, with all the random confidence of a seven year old. "Because she can do anythin' and Kaou-zan can't do a damn thing to stop her."

"Noone would ever say you weren't biased, kid." Despite himself, amusement glittered in Tasuki's bronze gaze. "Though it's for sure there ain't many women like your Ma in the whole o' Kounan, let alone in the western mountains. I wouldn't have let her near Reikaku-zan if she was anythin' less than that... keep that in mind, Jin, for when you start gettin' to the stage o' bringin' home girls. They gotta be able to stand the mountain — you understand? There ain't no weak women on Reikaku-zan."

"I don't want to bring home any girls." Jin snorted. "Girls cry an' make a fuss over stuff. An' they paint their face an' tell guys lies to get them to give more money."

"I don't tell lies!" Shishi objected indignantly, and Tasuki clamped her hand down on her shoulder, sending her a warning glance.

"Shut up, else we go home." He ordered. "Stop yellin' idiot things. Jin wasn't talkin' about you. Were you, Jin?"

"No." Jin looked bewildered. "I was talkin' about proper girls. Not you, Shishi. You're different... you're Kashira's cub."

Tasuki glanced at the young boy, a rare flash of perception piercing through him as he realised Jin's remarks stemmed back to the boy's own uncertain early childhood.

"That stupid whore of a mother of his sure gave him a rude awakenin' to the world." He reflected grimly. "I guess I'll haveta keep an eye on that. Sometimes he says things... Anzu's mentioned it an' she's right. He has a funny idea o' men an' women an' I gotta knock it outta him. He's a bandit now — he doesn't need to know about brothels an' courtesans an' why his ma kept changin' her name to hide from her debts."

"The tumblers have finished, Papa." Shishi jerked him back to reality at that moment. "Do you think, if I asked her, Okaa-san would teach me to do that stuff? Like they did?"

"You're already enough of a monkey. You don't need any trainin' in how to be a better one." Tasuki said bluntly. "Forget it, chibi. Besides, you want to be a bandit, not an acrobat, right?"

"Yes, but..."

"So focus on your sword." Tasuki told her firmly. "You master that before you worry about anythin' else."

Shishi sighed, looking dissatisfied, but she subsided, and Tasuki shook his head slowly, eying her ruefully as, not for the first time, he half wished that Suzaku had blessed him with a son instead of an impetuous, hairbrained daughter.

"You are really more trouble than you're worth, sometimes." He reflected aloud, and Shishi poked out her tongue at him, not noticeably crushed by his tactless observation. Before the discussion could continue, however, there was a collective gasp from the crowd as the energetic acrobats were replaced by a strange individual, long silver hair flying loose in the wind as he settled himself down before the crowd. A strange instrument was clutched beneath his fingers, and to Tasuki's uneducated gaze it looked like a nikou, although he knew as soon as the man began to play that it was not. An odd, eerie tune echoed up from the instrument, capturing the crowd in a minute, and Shishi's eyes became big as she pushed forward to see the man more clearly.

"What kind of a man is he?" She murmured, and as Tasuki followed her gaze, he shook his head slowly. The strange creature that now sat before them was pale as the moon, long argent-gilted hair flowing loose around his tired, thin features and he clasped his instrument to him closely as if it were something more than just part of his act. His eyes were a deep violet colour, which in other circumstances may have been considered attractive, but the stranger's gaze was dull and clouded, with no sense of anything in them at all. Tasuki frowned, wondering at the contrast between the man's soulless demeanour and the magical sound of the music he had begun to play.

"I don't know." He admitted. "Someone from the East, maybe. I ain't never seen a guy like that — he's not from Kounan, that's for sure."

"He's like a ghost." Jin breathed. "Like a real live ghost, Kashira. Do you think... is that what he is? Could he be a dead guy?"

"Don't be stupid, Jin. Dead people can't hold musical instruments." Shishi said frankly, before Tasuki could respond. "That's just dumb."

"Dead people don't usually play for circus acts, either." Tasuki responded ruefully. "No, Jin. He ain't a dead guy. He's some kind o' tribesman, that's all. From some tribe outside o' the South."

"His music is pretty." Shishi murmured, and as if he had heard her words, the man met her gaze, a faint smile lighting up his sober, tragic features. Shishi stared at him for a moment. Then she dimpled, acknowledging his gaze with her own wide grin. The strange man began to

play a different tune on his instrument, his gaze never leaving Shishi's face, and Tasuki saw a faint flicker of life in the otherwise empty eyes. As he finished his tune, there were cheers and calls from the crowd, and Shishi clapped her hands together.

"That was cool." She decided. "Papa, can we stay longer? Please?"

"Looks like they're packing up for the day, kid." Tasuki shook his head. "An' we have other things to do. Kouji an' the rest'll be back soon an' I oughta be doin' my share. There'll probably be stuff for the both o' you to carry back, too — since you insisted on doin' the walk down, you can do your bit goin' back too."

"Boring." Shishi sighed. "Do I have to?"

"Yes." Tasuki ruffled his fingers through the girl's hair playfully. "That's the price you pay for sneakin' through tunnels — take it as Kashira's orders, okay? Sooner you start obeyin' them, the sooner you'll find yourself a proper bandit. Got it?"

"I guess." Shishi looked despondant.

"We'll split it, Shishi." Jin suggested. "You an' me. If you like."

"I can carry it on my own." Shishi shook her head. "I'm not weak, Jin. I'll be able to manage it. You'll see."

Tasuki opened his mouth to interrupt what could potentially become a battle of obstinate wills when a shout from across the square alerted him to the sudden commotion that had begun to unfold. In the centre of it was the pale-skinned musician that had so charmed Shishi with his unusual music, and as Tasuki watched, his brows knitted together in confusion. It was not clear immediately what had caused the problem, but as he drew closer, he found he was able to pick up faint snippets of the conversation.

"You damn well do as you're told an' you do it now!" One of the circus officials were saying, his tones distinctively edged with the harsh notes of the Eastern dialect. "You don't talk to people without our say so — you're our property, or did you forget that, you stupid old man? You're nothin' but a piece of circus property an' the people o' Souun don't want to hear anythin' trash like you has to say."

"You're nothin' but a slave an' a freak, so do as you're told else you'll get a beatin' like no other." The second man added. "If you want to eat tonight, you'll get your ass back where it belongs an' don't even think o' speakin' out of line again. You play when we tell you an' you leave when we tell you. It ain't hard... even a stupid tribal idiot like you can manage to understand that, can't you?"

"I..." The pale man held up his hands in what appeared to be a conciliatory gesture, and Tasuki saw a flicker of faint uncertainty in his amethyst eyes. "I only..."

"Don't you answer me back!" The first man exploded at this, and with a flick of his wrist he'd pulled a whip from his belt, cracking it in the direction of the unfortunate musician. The man flinched back as the whip came down again, this time glancing across the performer's cheek. As the crowd drew back, clearly not wanting to become involved in what was turning into a messy situation, Tasuki felt a flare of anger rise up inside of him. He narrowed his gaze, his fingers straying towards the tessen.

"Papa, they're going to kill him!" Shishi exclaimed. "You have to stop them... Papa, you have to!"

"Jin, take Shishi an' go wait by Iwai-san's market stall." Tasuki's brows knitted together and he pushed his daughter in the direction of the young bandit boy. "Do it an' don't question me — jus' go there an' wait for Kouji. I don't want you gettin' involved in somethin' nasty."

"But Papa..." Shishi protested, and Tasuki shot her a glance.

"Don't worry." He said softly. "I'll sort it. This is Reikaku-zan territory — an' I ain't settlin' for this behaviour in Souun. Jus' go with Jin an' wait for Kouji. Okay? It'll be fine."

"Come on, Shishi. Let the Kashira fix it." Jin grabbed Shishi by the arm, pulling her forcibly out of the way, and now the children were out of his line of sight, Tasuki stretched his fingers, pulling the tessen from his back as he drew closer to the commotion in the centre of the square. As he did so, several of the townsfolk recognised him, and gasps and whispers went around the surrounding spectators as they realised their Suzaku-appointed guardian had taken exception to the blatant display of slave-owner violence in the centre of Souun's usually calm streets.

So engrossed in their actions were the circus owners that they did not register Tasuki's approach until the bandit reached out his hand to grab the flail of the whip in his hand, pulling it forcibly from the man's grasp and tossing it down on the ground.

"What the hell are you doing?" The man reacted indignantly, and Tasuki's eyes narrowed, fire flickering in his bronze eyes.

"That's my line." He said quietly. "Where the hell do you think you are, you piece of scum? Or don't you know that there ain't no slavery in Kounan?"

"Get out of the way — this ain't your business." The second man snapped, as Tasuki neatly put himself between the men and the bleeding,

bewildered musician.

“You obviously don’t know how things work in Souun, then.” Tasuki rolled back his sleeves, more gasps coming from the crowd as the glitter of Suzaku’s symbol flared against his skin. “This is Reikaku-zan country. An’ I’m Genrou of Reikaku-zan, which means nothin’ goes through this town without goin’ through me first. I say you stop, you stop. Else you an’ your little band of idiots will find yourself more than a little worse for wear.”

“You want to fight, is that it?” The first man retrieved his whip, pulling a blade from his belt as he glared at Tasuki, and the bandit smiled, a cold, humourless smile.

“Damn right.” He retorted. “If you bring disgustin’ behaviour into Kounan, I’ll fight you with every ounce I got.”

“Then we’ll kill you, you idiot.” The second man snorted. “There are two of us and one of you — and you’d fight to protect a worthless piece of circus property? That man’s not worth defending — he belongs to us and everything he does is dependant on our orders. He’s not a person for you to defend. He’s a dirty Meihi an’ he’s not worth anything better. There ain’t a way to treat those people but violence. They don’t understand jus’ yellin’ at them.”

“And I’ll tell you again, there’s no slavery in Kounan.” Tasuki brought his tessens down against his hand with a thump to emphasise his point. “You’re the ones who really don’t understand. Crossin’ Reikaku-zan’s bandits ain’t a good idea... if I were you, I’d escape while you still have the chance.”

“We don’t run away from anything.” The first man snapped, and Tasuki shrugged, raising the tessens as it glittered with flickers of amber energy.

“Your call.” He said quietly. “I guess I’ll show you the hard way.”

He raised the weapon above his head, and all around him the crowd shifted back, aware of the danger of the situation but unwilling to withdraw and miss seeing the legendary wolf of Reikaku-zan release his divine fire on the circus owners. Ruefully Tasuki realised that he’d become the next stage in the community entertainment, but even so, he knew he could not back down.

He turned to glance at the still cowering Meihi behind him, jerking his free hand towards the back of the crowd.

“Get outta here.” He said brusquely. “Go! Now! Else you’ll get caught up in it — an’ I ain’t tryin’ to hurt you.”

The man stared at him for a moment, then stumbled to his feet, taking a

few uncertain steps backwards. As he did so, Tasuki heard the sound of a blade moving through the air and he frowned, countering it with his tessens as he fixed the interloper with the darkest glare he could muster.

*“**Rekka Shin'en!**” He exclaimed, as he felt the rush of hot energy whip through his body and out of the glittering silver fan. It flared across the square, catching the edge of the circus’ carefully constructed display and sending panicked performers running in all directions.*

*“The next one is you two.” Tasuki turned his attention to the two owners who suddenly did not seem so cocksure as they stared at the still glowing tessens in alarm. “Let me introduce myself properly. I’m **Tasuki**, one of Suzaku’s Celestial Warriors. This here’s my friend the tessens, an’ he doesn’t like slave traders or slave owners any more’n I do. That’s worth a penalty — you ain’t paid toll yet, an’ I don’t mind takin’ it from you by force if I have to. If you don’t want to be chargrilled to a crisp, I suggest you take your cowardly asses away from this place an’ do it fast. I don’t want to see scum like you in Souun again... now or ever, else it’ll be your life. You understand me?”*

The men faltered for a moment, and Tasuki raised his tessens warningly.

“Do you want to risk it?” He whispered menacingly, and the men took several steps back from him.

“What the hell...” One of them murmured. “You...”

“You heard what the Kashira said.” Kouji’s voice came from the crowd, and suddenly Tasuki was aware of his second in command at the front of the melee, his own sword drawn as he eyed the circus men coldly. “Clear outta here. Leave your stuff behind — Reikaku-zan’ll be takin’ it as toll for your insult against the people of Souun... but you ain’t welcome in the western mountains.”

This was too much for the two men and they fled with a yell, the one dropping his whip in his hurry to evade the enchanted harisen and the sword-wielding bandit.

Tasuki sheathed his tessens, meeting Kouji’s glance with a rueful one, and Kouji grimaced.

“You do like to make a scene, don’t you.” He murmured. “Oh well. Shit, Genrou, I guess there’s no such thing as a quiet trip to Souun when you’re with the bandit posse.”

“Jus’ shut your face an’ collect up from this place.” Tasuki ordered. “I mean what I said — collect their takings as toll. I won’t stand for slavery, Kouji — an’ not right in front of me, right here in the middle o’ Souun. What did you expect me to do — jus’ stand there an’ let a guy be beaten to

death in front of me?"

"No, of course not." Kouji shook his head. "All right. Saiyo, Gai — you heard the Kashira. We're takin' toll."

As the bandits hurried to do their leader's bidding, Tasuki turned back towards the crowd, approaching the huddled form of the beaten Meihi and pausing at his side, crouching down as the older man raised his gaze.

"Why...?" He whispered, and Tasuki smiled, shrugging his shoulders.

"I don't believe in slavery." He said simply. "That's all. An' I don't believe in someone gettin' whipped t'death in the middle o' the place."

"Reikaku-zan... no... Genrou. T... Tasuki." The man said softly. "That's your name, ojisama?"

"Yes." Tasuki nodded. "You heard that, huh? You speak Chinese, then?"

"Living with those people, it's impossible not to learn." The man agreed, reaching a rueful, resigned finger up to touch the whip-gash that sliced across his cheek. "I'm grateful for your kindness, Genrou of Reikaku-zan."

"It ain't kindness. It's common sense." Tasuki said frankly, somewhat embarrassed by the simplicity of the man's remarks. "But look. We chased them outta here. You don't gotta go back with them. If you come with me, I know someone who can treat your wounds, an' then..."

"I'll have to go back to them." The man shook his head, and Tasuki looked startled.

"Why?" He demanded. "They treat you like that — why wouldn't you take your chance to be free?"

"So long as I travel, I might yet find my brother." The man smiled slightly. "Besides, it is the life I've known for so long... I don't know that I know any other way to live, now."

"But they'll kill you, if you go back to them now!"

"No... I don't think so. I think you frightened them too much for that." The man shook his head again. "You are a kind man indeed, for helping me. I'm grateful for that. Many would not have intervened — but you did. I won't forget that. Suzaku's men have kind hearts, it seems."

His gaze fell on Tasuki's still exposed right forearm, and Tasuki frowned, shrugging his shoulders.

"Little use it seems to be, if you're just goin' to go back." He murmured.

"Papa! Papa, is he all right?"

At that moment Shishi came tearing across the square, Jin in hot pursuit as he tried to grab her by the arm.

“Shishi, Kashira told you to stay with me. Shishi! Get back here!”

“I want to see if the old guy’s okay.” Shishi responded, dropping down at the injured man’s side as she raised her gaze to his. “Are you all right, Ojisan? Did they hurt you?”

“You...” The man gazed at her for a moment, then he smiled, a faint flicker of life in his tired eyes. “Ah, now I see. You enjoyed my music, didn’t you, musume-chan? And now I understand why.”

He glanced at Tasuki.

“Your daughter takes after you.” He murmured. “You should be proud of that, Genrou-sama. She has the same kindness in her eyes as you do in yours. The song I played is an old traditional song of my people — and it always holds the most appeal for the ones who have true goodness sealed away in their hearts. This child is one to be proud of, I’m sure of it.”

“I’m going to be Kashira like Papa one day.” Shishi agreed, pulling her hankerchief from her pocket as she reached across to wipe the blood from the man’s cheek. “Did they hurt you anywhere else, ojisan? You play such pretty music — why did they hurt you at all?”

“Because they’re scum, Shishi.” Tasuki said quietly, and Jin nodded his head.

“They’re bastards who think they’re better’n anyone else, so they hit out an’ beat people who are weaker.” He said frankly, and Tasuki shot him another startled glance, inwardly wondering what exactly the boy knew of such things. He nodded.

“Exactly.” He agreed. “And I don’t think you should go back to them, ojisan. Whatever you say, there must be somethin’ we can do to help you, an’...”

“No... my duty is to go back.” The Meihi shook his head, pulling himself unsteadily to his feet, and Shishi hurried to help him, eliciting a grateful smile as her reward. “Thank you, musume-chan. Or no... Shishi? Is that what your father called you? A lion cub indeed... keep that lion’s spirit, child. One day I’m sure you’ll find a way to make the most of having it.”

He smiled, bowing his head towards them.

“Thank you again for your kindness, Genrou-sama.” He murmured. “I won’t forget... that the people of Kounan have good hearts.”

With that he shuffled away in the direction the two miscreants had

headed, and Tasuki frowned, watching him go with a mixture of emotions in his heart.

“Are you going to let him go back?” Kouji’s voice at his right hand startled him and he turned, shrugging his shoulders.

“I can’t stop him.” He said helplessly. “To make him do anythin’ would be as bad as what they were doin’...he wants to go back an’ I don’t think I can force him not to.”

“Seems a waste, when you saved him like that.” Kouji reflected. “They might kill him, you know.”

“Yeah, I know.” Tasuki frowned. “But right now... look, Kouji, I want to make sure these bastards are driven outta our patch. So we’ll take the supplies, the toll an’ most important, the brats back to the mountain. Then you, me an’ a bunch of the strongest guys’ll come back out. We’ll make sure they’re driven over the border into Sairou — an’ if we can, we’ll make sure those bastards die of fright before they lay a finger on that old guy again. Whatever he thinks... noone deserves t’be treated like that. Damn Eastern bastards... I won’t stand for it. Not in the shadow of my mountain — Hakurou-sama wouldn’t have taken it an’ nor will I.”

“All right.” Kouji nodded his head. “I agree. We might have issues — poverty, disease, bandit rivalry. But we ain’t so low as to permit that kind of behaviour on the people here. I’ll come with you. Don’t worry. We’ll make sure they know not to come back if they value their lives.”

“Aniki, what **was** that man?” Jin asked curiously. “He was white as a ghost — but he bled, so he really wasn’t one. What was he — do you know?”

“A Meihi, I think.” Kouji reflected. “I don’t know much about them, but I think they’re a tribe from the North... from Hokkan originally. I’ve heard a lot of them were made slaves in Kutou — but I don’t know if it’s true. They’re a peaceful people, far as I know. When my folk were involved in the smugglin’, generations back, they sometimes encountered Meihi on their travels. They’re a people who don’t kill, or even fight — they jus’ live separate from everyone in their own community. Own language, own culture... everythin’. Poor bastards didn’t stand a chance when the East started imprisonin’ an’ slaughterin’ tribesfolk. I guess there ain’t many of them left now.”

“An’ that ojisan was one of them?” Shishi said softly. “That sucks. He shouldn’t have to be a slave. Should he, Papa?”

“No, he shouldn’t.” Tasuki said darkly. “But that’s the East for you, kid. A lot of twisted shit goes on there... that’s why we fought a war with them,

before you were born. Keep that in mind, the both o' you. Kutou's a warped kind o' place, even now... be glad you live in Kounan, okay?"

"Right." Kouji glanced up at the sky. "As your pa says, Shishi — sometimes the world outside the mountain ain't as perfect or as excitin' as you'd like — remember that, next time you wanna sneak out. There's a good reason why you shouldn't run riot all over Kounan — jus' because we're peaceful here doesn't mean everywhere is. There are folk like those bastards in all places — watch out for them else you might find yourself gettin' killed."

"Let's go back to the mountain." Tasuki said frankly, as he saw the expression on his daughter's face become uncharacteristically thoughtful. "We'll make sure those guys don't come back to Souun, for sure. But for now I wanna get the kids away from here. We've caused enough of a scene for one day."

He frowned.

"I hope that old guy will be all right." He added.

"We'll do our best to make sure of it." Kouji promised. "At least as far as Reikaku-zan territory stretches. Don't worry, Genrou — there'll be no murder of slaves on your territory... we'll make sure of that!"

Chapter 2

Chapter One

“You know, you’ll never master this if you don’t at least hold the damn sword like it ain’t goin’ to bite you.”

Shishi stood back against the tree, frustration in her bronze eyes as she glared at her hapless companion. From the midst of the copse of trees, Aoiketsu glanced hesitantly down at the weapon he held loosely in his grip, then back at her.

“But it could cut me.” He pointed out. “I don’t want that to happen.”

“For Suzaku’s sake, will you get a backbone?” Shishi exclaimed. “Dammit, Aoi, if we’re leaving for the North Country in a few days you need to at least have some idea what to do with that thing! Even Hiki doesn’t hold the *shinken* quite so gingerly — it’ll only cut you if you’re an idiot and hold it like a girl!”

“But *you’re* a girl.” Aoiketsu pointed out. Shishi groaned, shaking her head.

“Just do as you’re told, will you?” She snapped. “Shit, do you want to get killed as soon as we leave camp? Listen to me, Aoi — Jin was a damn good swordsman an’ he still got taken off guard. It’s dangerous — I don’t know how you’ve survived up till now, but dammit, you need to get some killer instinct into you! Or at least a little self-preservation... else you won’t need the enemy to kill you. You’ll be killin’ yourself!”

Aoiketsu’s eyes widened at this, and he released his grip, sending the sword clattering to the floor.

Shishi sighed.

“This is pointless.” She said frankly. “You’re useless. No matter how much I try to teach you, you’re still useless. Aoi, you’ve been with us for almost two weeks now. Everyone else has been plottin’ maps or discussin’ strategy or tryin’ to find out where this wretched Shinzahou might be. An’ you... what exactly have you done? Aside from refuse to dress like a normal person? I swear, I don’t understand how Miramu didn’t slice your damn head off at a glance, to be honest. You must be charmed by some divine spirit or somethin’, because I swear, you’re

impossible.”

Aoiketsu frowned, glancing at his hands. It was, as Shishi had said, almost a fortnight since he had joined the band of Southerners and the original hope to make a quick start into Hokkan had been delayed by the fact that none of them really knew where the Shinzahou they sought was. After consulting the Emperor, Chichiri had returned to the Eastern Village with several maps and the King’s urging to take the safest and most effective route into the North country. Consequently the sorcerer and his bandit cohort had spent much of the last few days scouring over the charts for the best way across the Northern divide. Reizeitei’s agents along the Eastern border had indicated no sign of Kutou’s movement into Hokkan, and this in itself had made the Southerners uneasy.

All, in fact, except Aoiketsu himself.

“*They* won’t leave until they know from me what’s happening *here*.” He reasoned now, as he bent to slowly pick up the sword. “Shit, it’s hard pretending not to know what to do with a sword. I wish Shishi’d give up on me and lose interest. Holding the damn thing properly is almost instinctive... I never imagined how difficult it was to be incompetent.”

“Now what are you dreaming about?” Shishi’s cutting tones sliced through his thoughts and he glanced up, holding the weapon out to her with a shrug.

“I’m not supposed to wield this,” he said evenly. “My father never did. He had men to do that kind of thing for him.”

“It’s time for a reality check, then.” Shishi snatched the sword away, wielding it round on him and forcing him to take a hasty couple of steps back. “You’re an exile. I told you this before. You ain’t got a father or a family to hire men to protect you. You told us yourself that your Pa was killed — maybe if he’d known what to do with one of these he’d have been better off — what do you think?”

She pushed the blade towards him again, and Aoiketsu stumbled backwards, falling over a rock in the path as he landed with a bump on the ground. He held up his hands in surrender, shaking his head.

“I just mean I’ve never been taught to do those things.” He said hastily. “I didn’t mean that I was better than you or anything like that. I just...”

He faltered, and Shishi sighed, slipping her weapon back into its scabbard.

“You’re just hopeless.” She said resignedly. “I guess not all men can be heroes, huh?”

Aoiketsu frowned, digesting this, then he slowly shook his head.

“Your brother was a hero, huh?” He asked quietly, and Shishi started, then nodded, her expression becoming wistful.

“Damn right he was.” She said softly. “But you don’t need t’ try an’ match up to him. In a million years, Aoi, you couldn’t. Jin was brave an’ honest an’ one hell of a fighter. I’m not bad, but he was a better swordsman than me, an’ stronger, too. He was... I can’t explain it. But dammit, we’re goin’ to miss him, going north.”

Aoiketsu’s blue eyes clouded, and he sighed, resting a hand on her shoulder.

“I am sorry.” He said quietly. “I didn’t mean to bring back bad memories. But in the two weeks or so I’ve been with you, everyone has always spoken about Jin-san so well. And Reizeitei-sama...”

He faltered, remembering the brief meeting he had had with Kounan’s young Emperor. It had been rather a surreal affair, all in all, for the young man had been no older than Aoiketsu himself, and they had stood almost eye to eye, Reizeitei’s golden eyes meeting Aoiketsu’s strange blue ones across the palace chamber. For a moment, a strange sensation had washed through the young Kutou soldier, for he had remembered only too well the stories of Nakago slaying Reizeitei’s father Hotohori. For the briefest of instants, he felt some kind of connection to the young ruler of the South. Then, as soon as it had come, it was gone.

Reizeitei had been grieved at the bandit’s death — far more so than Aoiketsu would have imagined — and had even sent men to the mountain to bestow a special honour on Jin’s memorial, as well as to complete the construction of his burial chamber. Consequently the white-stone structure was now finished, with the image of Suzaku glittering over the entrance, and inside, the insignia of the Imperial house marking the fact that Jin’s sacrifice had been in Kounan’s name. Aoiketsu had seen several equivalent markings in Kutou, among the cemetery of the brave within the palace complex, and he had found himself thinking of his mother’s grave once more. The honour and reverence given this dead bandit, who seemed such an unlikely hero had sparked once more the thoughts in his own mind about his mother’s presence among the soldiers and fighters.

“Reizeitei-sama what?” Shishi demanded now, bringing Aoiketsu back to the present, and he smiled ruefully, shrugging his shoulders.

“He seemed to care a lot about what had happened.” He admitted. “I didn’t realise the King of Kounan paid such attention to everything.”

“Well, Reizeitei-sama is the son of a Seishi, just like I’m Tasuki’s cub.” Shishi said with a shrug. “And Jin was... well, he was like my brother. Besides, Jin gave Reizeitei-sama his word before we left that he’d protect Hiki and me — Hiki especially, cos she needs it more than I do. An’ so he did. Which is why Reizeitei-sama honoured him so much.”

She smiled faintly.

“In the war against Kutou, you know, lots of bandits fought an’ died for Hotohori-sama.” She added. “Jin jus’ followed their example, an’ Reizeitei-sama followed his Pa’s in honourin’ him. That’s all.”

She sighed, sinking down onto a rock.

“You really better had be good with navigation, you know.” She added. “Because otherwise you’re goin’ to be a dead weight. An’ why we’re still in Kounan is anyone’s guess... I thought we were in a hurry an’ that keepin’ you here was supposed to be a risk, but there’s been no sign of your stalker an’...well, we ain’t movin’ out. If it’s goin’ to stay this peaceful... I don’t know why you need to drag along with us anyway.”

“Because so long as I’m here, Miramu won’t come close.”

At that moment Myoume stepped into the clearing, casting the two youngsters a smile as she did so. Her gaze lingered for a moment on Aoiketsu, then she nodded. “And you haven’t cut him to pieces yet, Shishi — that’s a good thing. But we need to take him with us North. I feel it’s important that we do — it makes sense to me that Aoiketsu should be a part of the trip. Besides, I’m coming with you. And as soon as I leave Kounan, Miramu will know he can conceal his chi again. And he might decide to sneak in unawares.”

“That’s true, I suppose.” Shishi acknowledged. “All right. We’ll take him. But shit, he’d better pull his weight.”

“That’s why I’ve come looking for the both of you.” Myoume nodded. “Chichiri’s got the maps spread out on the floor in the farmhouse and he’d like the two of you to come see what you think. Hikari’s already with him — and I’ve given up trying to focus my energy on locating the treasure for now.”

She sighed, pulling a face.

“All I get is some strange music echoing in my ears, and it’s enough to drive you a little crazy.” She admitted. “Snow, mountains, the pass from Yukigase. I can’t even get my thoughts to focus on the North at all... that music keeps blocking me out. I don’t know if it’s on purpose or not — or if it’s even important. But either way, I’m taking a break from trying. I think Aidou-san was preparing lunch, anyway... and she said there’d be plenty for you too, Shishi, if you want to come.”

“I’m starving.” Shishi agreed. “Trying to teach this clod to use a sword is like trying to get blood from a stone.”

She grimaced at Aoiketsu, then,

“Actually, that might even be easier. He’s hopeless. He can’t even hold the thing because he’s too damn scared to cut himself with it.”

“Well, we can’t all be bandits.” Myoume said softly, her gaze flitting to Aoiketsu as she said this, and Aoiketsu frowned, casting the prophet a wary glance.

“Is something amiss, Myoume-san?” He asked quietly, and Myoume shook her head.

“Should it be?” She asked him evenly, and Aoiketsu shrugged.

“I don’t know.” he admitted. “You just... that was a funny look you gave me just now. I wondered if... you thought I was useless too.”

“No. I don’t think you’re useless.” Myoume smiled at him, and once again Aoiketsu felt a faint flicker of unease stir deep within him. “And I think you’ll prove to be a great asset to our journey, when we leave.”

“You really think so, huh?” Shishi looked startled, and Myoume nodded.

“I do.” She agreed. “So lets walk back to the village and see what Chichiri’s suggestions are. Since we can’t get any kind of fix on the treasure, I think the plan is to head to the border and cross via the mountain path near Yukigase, since it’s territory you and Hikari both know, Shishi. Aoi, are you also familiar with this path?”

“In some respects.” Aoiketsu nodded slowly. “I have not travelled that way, but I am familiar with the layout of the terrain, yes. I have a good memory for geography.”

“Well, then you can say what you think too, when you see the Emperor’s maps.” Myoume suggested. “The Chinese used on the charts is somewhat old and difficult to read — I’ve struggled with it, and Chichiri seems to be the only one able to read it clearly — not much use since he can’t come with us North. But if you’re familiar with the

layout of the terrain, that might be enough to help us follow it.”

“I can read Chinese.” Aoiketsu said mildly. “And I’d be happy to take a look.”

“We all read Chinese, bonehead.” Shishi snapped, as they headed down towards the village boundaries. “You’re not some genius just because you can recognise a few kanji.”

“I wasn’t implying that I was.” Aoiketsu said simply, and Myoume laughed.

“I wonder, what does it take to spark your temper, Aoi?” She asked playfully. “Shishi’s been digging at you since you came here, and you haven’t risen to her properly once. Or is it just the fact that she’s so quick with her sword — are you afraid to be hurt?”

“I don’t want to fight Shishi-san.” Aoiketsu shot the bandit a smile. “Because even if she thinks I’m useless, she and her family have been kind to me and provided me with shelter. Besides, in some respects, I am useless. I’m weak and I vomit at the sight of blood. I’m a poor student of martial techniques and so far there’s been little for me to do.”

“Aoi, Shishi! Myoume!” As they approached the Ri farmhouse, Hikari pushed open the door, casting a warm grin at them as she ushered them inside. “Chichiri’ll be glad to see you. He wants to talk to us about the best way to get into the North, but I’m hopeless and I can’t even read the place names on the map.”

“Apparently Aoi can read Chinese.” Shishi said derisively. “I’m sure he’ll be able to solve the problem in an instant, with his special wimp-noble powers.”

“Shishi, shut up.” Hikari shot her a glare, and Shishi laughed.

“He doesn’t care, so why should you?” She responded. “Besides, if we’re travelling with this map, one of us has to be able to read what it says.”

“It’s even beyond me in places.” Myoume sighed. “And I know a lot of characters. And even if I try to use my power to trace our path, all I hear is this stupid, eerie music.”

She ran her fingers through her snow white hair.

“I’m getting sick to death of it.” She added.

“So take a break. Aoi and I’ll take a look at the map.” Shishi said with a shrug as they stepped into the main room, stopping as they

observed the sorcerer squatting on his *kesa* in the furthest corner, the aging parchment stretched out in front of him as he pored over it. At their entrance he glanced up, offering them a smile.

“This is the clearest map we have for both Kounan and Hokkan.” He said. “But it’s both old and complicated. Even so, I think it shows the possible routes most clearly of all of the charts Bou... Reizeitei-sama gave me. Shishi, Aoi-kun — come take a look and see what you think. Aoi, if you’re familiar with the North country, you might be able to see a better way into Touran than I can.”

“*That’s* what we’re taking with us?” Shishi stared at it, then up at her uncle. “No kidding that it’s difficult kanji! Are we sure it’s even in Chinese at all?”

“It’s Chinese, all right, but antiquated.” Aoiketsu settled down across the other side, tilting his head on one side as he scrutinised the parchment. “Chichiri-san — Myoume-san says that she hasn’t any idea where this Shin... whatever it’s called is hidden. But Hokkan is indeed a large country. Are you thinking that our trip should be to the cave on Koku-zan — or another route entirely?”

“I’m not sure.” Chichiri admitted, sitting back against the wall. “I’m conscious of your safety even more this time around, all of you. Losing Jin wasn’t just a tragedy for everyone, it was a logistical nightmare, too. He was a remarkably strong young fighter... even with Myoume’s Seishi power and Shishi’s own skill, I’m concerned about the danger this trip might pose.”

“Well, you can count Aoi out of the protection squad.” Shishi snorted. “He can barely even hold the damn sword.”

“Not all of us are built to wield blades, you know.” Chichiri offered Aoiketsu a smile, and the young soldier returned it ruefully. “I wouldn’t know what to do with one either, to be honest — but everyone has some skill they can add to the equation. And if your navigation skill is any good at all...”

He paused, and Aoiketsu pursed his lips.

“If we followed this track through the forests via Taichi-ike towards Choukou and then Yukigase, then there’s an easier climb through the mountain pass than the one illustrated on this map.” He said quietly. “I’m pretty sure from other charts I’ve studied that there’s a network of caves somewhere in the mountains between Yukigase and the North. It was used, in the past, for refugees from Hokkan into Kounan during the time when my nation invaded the North country. I don’t know for sure, but I believe it’s a quicker track into Touran directly.

And since it isn't marked on this map, it seems unlikely that it's marked on many newer ones either. Making it a fairly secure route of passage for us to take into Hokkan."

"A secret pathway?" Shishi shot him a doubtful look, and Aoiketsu nodded.

"It's alluded to." He agreed, running his finger down the column of Chinese as he glanced at her. "I suppose it originated as a smuggler's passage, between the two countries. It's beneath the worst of the landscape and the weather, and this marked path runs directly over the top in places. But here it even speaks of a '*deep pathway through the mountains*'. That's not the trek across the slopes themselves."

"Shit, you really can read this stuff." Shishi stared at him, and Aoiketsu smiled.

"Perhaps I'm not completely useless." He responded, and Shishi snorted.

"You're a bookworm, then." She retorted.

"But he's right." Chichiri nodded. "That is what it says... and I hadn't made the connection myself. I've been through the pass a few times, but never beneath the mountains. I know there were caves there, but..."

He frowned.

"There was a major cave collapse some time not long before the Suzaku Shichi Seishi met up." He continued. "I don't know whether the pathway you mean was blocked or not, Aoi. However, I know there's someone in Yukigase who *would* know — and more, who'd be more than willing to help you, if he knew it was in Suzaku's name."

"Tamatama-san!" Hikari's eyes opened wide with realisation, and Chichiri nodded his head.

"Exactly." He agreed. "Tamatama was very fond of Nuriko... once upon a time. And since it was Nuriko who was... er... the reason for the cave's collapse, one way or another... I think that this is probably your best option. To head for the border via the route Aoiketsu suggests — through Choukou and along the Shouryuu to the north. And then speak to Tamatama about the mountain caves where Nuriko defeated the demon Yukiyasha. There's an ancient legend about demons in those mountains, which may explain why the passage has been written off maps even as old as this one."

He cast Aoiketsu a grin.

“It seems you weren’t exaggerating, and I’m glad.” He reflected. “I can trust this to your hands and be sure that you’ll be able to follow it.”

“Well, it seems important that I do my bit too.” Aoiketsu acknowledged. “Even if it is just as map-reader.”

He got to his feet, stretching.

“Are we, then, to leave shortly?” He asked. “Within the next couple of days, perhaps?”

“Yes, I think so.” Chichiri nodded. “One more trip to Souun to gather supplies either this afternoon or tomorrow, and then you should be able to make tracks. We’ve had no word from the Eastern border that the men in Kutou have made any attempt to leave their capital as yet — which is strange, but convenient for the time being. The longer they take over it, the better for us — it’s a further journey for us to reach Hokkan than it is from Kutou, anyway. So that being the case, we should probably take advantage of any head start we get.”

“Do they know in the East where the Shinzahou is?” Hikari asked, and Aoiketsu shook his head.

“I doubt it.” He said frankly, and Myoume shot him an interested glance.

“You seem pretty sure.” She remarked, and Aoiketsu bit his lip, shrugging his shoulders.

“If they knew where it was, wouldn’t they have left already?” He countered, inwardly berating his near-slip. “If the Emperor is intelligent enough a man to send his assassin into enemy country to slay me, he must have sophisticated communication channels. And had he known where this treasure was, he would have deployed his agents already to locate it. It strikes me that, if they are seeking the same thing as you are, they are still trying to locate its whereabouts. Just as you are.”

“You really haven’t a clue what we’re even looking for, do you?” Shishi demanded, and Aoiketsu offered her a faint smile.

“I wouldn’t have any idea.” He replied simply. “But if it is important to you, I will help you find it — in return for my protection and for the kindness you’ve shown me since I came here, I will do this much.”

He fingered the ring on his middle right finger absently.

“After all, I am of Kutou noble blood. Even if that means nothing in this age — *I* still believe in honour.”

“Blah.” Shishi grimaced, and Hikari shot her a dark look.

“Shishi, why do you keep picking on Aoi over everything?” She demanded. “He can’t help it if he’s not like Jin, you know... and it isn’t his fault he survived his encounter with Miramu. If you come to that, you and I both did, too — and so did Meikyo. It’s not Aoi’s fault he lived — so stop it, okay? We’ve got to travel together, and it’s not nice if you’re always digging in at him.”

“I guess.” Shishi looked rueful. “It’s just... shit, if he’d talk or dress like a normal person, it’d be a lot easier to stomach. I just ain’t got a clue what to do with *that*.”

She flung out her hand towards the young soldier, eying him resignedly.

“He insists on dressing like he’s still the heir to some Kutou fortune, no matter what anyone says about it, and he won’t even tie his hair in a tail like a normal fighter.” She added. “But most of all, he *talks* like the friggin’ Emperor, and that really pisses me off.”

“What’s wrong with the way I speak?” Aoiketsu looked surprised, and Shishi grimaced.

“I just don’t like it. It’s like you’re always so formal and flowery and unnecessary with how you talk.” She responded. “Reizeitei-sama is one thing — he *is* a friggin’ King, after all. But *you’re* just an exile. If your folks were killed, you ain’t got any reason to speak so fancy all the time.”

“I was always taught to speak nicely, because of my noble blood.” Aoiketsu said lightly. “I didn’t realise I had such an annoying turn of phrase, Shishi-san.”

“You’re doing it again!” Shishi exclaimed, exasperated. “Shit, at least *try* to talk like a normal person, will you? And quit it with the ‘san’ all the time too, huh? You’re barely older than Jin and you’re supposed to be one of the team. Stop it, will you? It makes me feel weird.”

Aoiketsu stared at her, and Hikari reached out to touch him on the arm.

“I don’t mind how you talk.” She assured him. “But Shishi is right on one account. You don’t have to call us ‘san’ — at least, not Shishi and me. We’re both younger than you are, after all. It does seem silly.”

“I... didn’t want to cause... any offence.” Aoiketsu said slowly. “After all, you are both the children of Celestial Warriors, are you not?”

“Yeah, like that makes a difference.” Shishi sighed. “Look, I guess you can’t help how you talk any more than I can, even if it does grate listenin’ to that stuck up language with that irritatin’ Eastern accent all the time. But at least call us Hikari an’ Shishi an’ be done with it. All right?”

Aoiketsu’s eyes widened for a moment. Then he nodded, offering her a rueful smile as he bowed his head in apology.

“I’ll remember.” He promised. “Shishi and Hikari it is. I’m sorry... it seems I’ve gone to the other extreme with my manners. I am not used to being surrounded by bandit people — I have no understanding of the social rules. But I... I’ll do my best not to offend in future.”

“You’re so hard on the poor boy.” Chichiri reflected, shaking his head in amusement. “Aoi-kun, you speak how you want to speak and maybe some of it will rub off on Shishi... she already uses far too many curse words for a young lady her age, so you might teach her a few things.”

“Chichiri!” Shishi stared at her uncle, mortified, and Chichiri laughed.

“Well, it goes both ways.” He said mildly. “You know how Aidou feels about you swearing in this house, where Meikyo or Eiju might hear you.”

“But they’re not here. Meikyo’s helping Obasama cook and Eiju’s in charge of the firewood for the oven.” Shishi reddened. “Sorry, Chichiri. I guess you’re right. I’ll try to remember.”

“Speaking of which, it’ll soon be time to eat.” Chichiri rolled up the map, setting it to one side. “Hikari-chan, do you think you can run to the well? It’s a hot day and I imagine cool spring water will be welcome considering the rising temperature... noone will want tea with the sun climbing in the sky again.”

“Summer’s really here now, huh.” Hikari looked rueful, nodding her head. “Although as soon as we head North I guess it’ll seem like winter all over again. I’ll get some water though — for sure. Aoi-kun, why don’t you come with me? We’ll be able to carry twice as much with two of us... and your arm is almost healed now.”

“If you like.” Aoiketsu looked startled. Hikari grinned at him, retrieving the wooden pails from the corner of the room. She tilted her

head, handing him one.

“Follow me.” She added. “It’ll be quicker this way — and it doesn’t bother me, the way you talk.”

Aoiketsu took the proffered pail, returning the smile as he followed the younger girl out of the Ri farmstead and across the crop-filled land to the well that had been built by Aidou’s ancestors in a time when the farm had belonged to the Kou family. It was sturdy and strong, feeding off a fresh underground stream, and as Hikari reached it, she grasped for the rope, pulling it towards her as she looped it under the handle of the pail.

“It took me a whole week to be able to do this without spilling water everywhere.” She said with an embarrassed grin. “Meikyo does it all the time, and I felt so stupid, being shown up by an eight year old. But now I can draw water quite well — is it stupid to be proud of something so simple?”

“I suppose not, if you’ve learnt a new skill in the process.” Aoiketsu sent her an odd look. “Although I don’t understand — how do you draw water when you’re at home?”

“Things are different there.” Hikari said vaguely. “We don’t have a well. The water comes via a different route, so I never had to do this before. It’s sort of fun, though. Like I’m out camping, or something. We used to do that, sometimes, when my brother and I were small.”

She sighed, leaning up against the stone structure.

“I forget about a lot of things, when I’m home. Things I take for granted — even memories.” She added. “Being here makes me focus on them a lot more. The fun stuff and everything. It’s impossible to just assume and forget, when I’m with Chichiri and his family. It’s so peaceful, being in Kounan like this. I’ve really become fond of it — and I almost wish we weren’t leaving for the North again. I’m not a huge fan of snow.”

“Me either.” Aoiketsu admitted. “But there doesn’t seem to be any way around it.”

He eyed her keenly.

“Your family must live a good distance from here, then.”

“Yes. They do. Further than you can even imagine.” Hikari agreed. “In a city that’s totally different from Souun or any of the places I’ve visited since I’ve been here.”

“What is it called, this city? Perhaps I’ve visited it in my own

travels.”

“Doubtful.” Hikari sent him a grin. “But it’s called Tokyo.”

“Tokyo.” Aoiketsu repeated the unfamiliar word carefully. Then he shook his head.

“I confess, it is a strange word to me.” He admitted, and Hikari laughed.

“Well, I did warn you.” She told him playfully, tossing the pail into the well as she wound the handle, sending it down to the cool, wet depths. “Listen, Aoi, I asked you to come help me because I wanted you to know that you’re part of the team now. Shishi’s rough on you because she’s still grieving for Jin — that’s all. It’s hurt her a lot more than anyone can really understand, I think — even though she’s not crying about it now, it’s still the worst thing the enemy could’ve done to her. Killing me, heck, even killing *her* — she probably would have dealt with dying better than seeing him die. It was hard enough for me — well, it still is — to accept he’s gone. But to her, Jin was like her brother. It’ll take even more time for that wound to close.”

She sighed.

“I think that when she sees you, she’s reminded of it.” She added thoughtfully. “Because you survived Miramu’s attentions. And she can’t quite get past that.”

“I suppose I don’t help by being as useless as I am with a sword.” Aoiketsu admitted, resting his hands on the well as he gazed pensively down into the darkness. “She cannot understand why I live and the young bandit died.”

“Probably not, but it’s no reason to pick on you so much.” Hikari said frankly. “Just, try not to take it to heart, huh? Shishi’s not a nasty person — she’s just hot-headed. When we first met, we had a major misunderstanding because of it, and started by hating each other — but now we’re friends. And I don’t want you and she to be arguing all journey north. It’ll be a pain if you are.”

“As I told Myoume-san, I’ve no intention of fighting anyone.” Aoiketsu said ruefully. “Believe me. That is not my purpose at all.”

“Good.” Hikari looked relieved, hauling the bucket from the well as she set it carefully down on the grass. “Well? Your turn? Or do you want me to do it?”

“No, I can manage.” Aoiketsu shook his head, taking the proffered rope and slinging it around the handle of his own pail. “I may be a

hopeless fighter, but I can pull water from a well.”

“You were really impressive, reading that map.” Hikari reflected. “That was really complicated Kanji — even Myoume couldn’t read it, and she... I dunno, she hallucinates kanji, or something, in her visions sometimes. I don’t understand it, but she’s said that before, that she does. But you read it like it was easy.”

“It was easy.” Aoiketsu paused in what he was doing, offering her a smile. “At least, I found it so.”

“You must be pretty smart, then.” Hikari sighed. “I have enough trouble with the kanji I’m meant to be learning at school — and we don’t learn half as many characters as Chichiri or even Jin and Shishi seem to know. It’s confusing — I feel practically illiterate here sometimes.”

Aoiketsu was thoughtful for a moment. Then he smiled, shrugging.

“Well, then we both have our limitations.” he said frankly. Hikari laughed, nodding her head.

“I like talking to you.” She admitted. “I feel like we have something in common. Do you think so? I’m not sure if it’s just the uselessness factor, or if it’s something else. But I’m glad that we found you in the forest. Not just because you were Miramu’s prey, but also because I think we’re going to be friends. And I’m glad about that.”

Aoiketsu did not answer at first, drawing the full pail up onto the edge of the well. Then he turned to face her, nodding his head slowly.

“Friends.” He repeated. “I wish life was simpler — then perhaps we truly would be.”

“What does that mean?” Hikari looked startled, and Aoiketsu shot her a wistful smile.

“I am the target of the East.” He reminded her. “My life is constantly in peril. Being an associate of mine is a dangerous thing. I doubt I can stay with you all indefinitely — however pleasant the idea might be. It will become too much of a risk and so I will move on. I will have to.”

“Not if we get the Shinzahou and stop Kutou.” Hikari’s eyes narrowed, and Aoiketsu pursed his lips.

“This treasure is that important?” He asked lightly, and Hikari nodded.

“I don’t know quite how it all works.” She agreed. “But... somehow,

it's important for us to have them. But so far we've lost twice. Because Kutou's people stoop to dirty tricks to get ahead."

"You mean, I assume, that assassin."

"Yes." Hikari sighed, rubbing her temples. "But not just him. Although — he leaves a bad taste in my mouth whenever his name is mentioned. Even before he killed Jin, he learnt somehow that Amiboshi had given us Seiryuu's Shinzahou. So — presumably on Kutou's orders — he came here and he abducted Chichiri's daughter in order to get it from us. Meikyo would've been killed if I hadn't've handed it over... it made me so angry, Aoi, that they could put a child like that in such a position just to get hold of a piece of jewellery. Blessed or not."

Aoiketsu's eyes opened wide, and his grip loosed on the wooden pail, sending it crashing back down into the well with a tremendous splash. He jumped at the sound, and Hikari grinned, shaking her head as she reached across to grab the rope.

"Maybe you *are* more hopeless than I am." She teased. "That wasn't very smart. At least you hadn't untied it — otherwise you'd have to tell Aidou-san what happened to her pail."

"I'm sorry." Aoiketsu pulled himself together. "I just... Meikyo-chan... are you quite serious? That assassin targeted *her* in order to get the Seiryuu Shinzahou to Kutou?"

"Perfectly serious." Hikari grimaced. "Because Chichiri and Tasuki refused to give it to him the first time he tried. He must've known that Chichiri'd rather die than have anything happen to his children — Meikyo in particular. Miramu's a jerk. Like Shishi told you — killing Jin's just one of the things he's done to upset us since we've been on this quest."

Aoiketsu's eyes darkened with anger.

"So he is." He murmured. "I had no idea that his depravity sank so low. But you believe this was on the orders of Kutou's Emperor?"

"Who else?" Hikari shrugged helplessly. "You shouldn't be surprised by that. He has a contract on your life, doesn't he?"

"Yes... I suppose he does." Aoiketsu bit his lip, inwardly trying to digest what he had just learnt. He sighed, shaking his head.

"It seems that Kutou has done much to make you angry." He said at length. Hikari snorted.

"No kidding." She agreed, reaching across to turn the handle as she

retrieved the slightly battered, soaked pail from the bottom of the well. “Which is why we need to get the Shinzahou from Hokkan. I’m determined this time. No matter what, I won’t let Jin down. And I won’t let Miramu come back and hurt Meikyo again. Or anyone else. I’m fed up with all of this — and it’s time we put a stop to it.”

“How?” Aoiketsu asked softly, as she handed him the second pail, scooping up her own, and she paused, turning to eye him pensively.

“I don’t know, yet.” She admitted. “Just that... somehow... it’s what we have to do. Kounan’s at peace, and I want it to stay that way. That’s what Jin died for... and why I’m here in the first place. It’s a lot of pressure, but I... I won’t go home until I’ve found a way. I just wish it was easier to know what that way was.”

Aoiketsu’s eyes narrowed, as he considered this remark. Then he shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, I will do my best to help you.” He said at length. “If it’s within my power to do so. I will come with you to Touran, Hikari.”

“Maybe by the time we get there, I’ll have a better idea of things. Or Myoume will, through her sight.” Hikari agreed. “And if we can prevent... if we can save... if we can do whatever it is I’m here to do, Aoi, we can stop Miramu from hurting you or anyone, too. So then you can be safe. Perhaps then you can stay here, in Kounan, if you wanted to — without being afraid.”

Aoiketsu stared at her, disturbed by how appealing an option this throwaway suggestion suddenly seemed. He frowned, shaking his head.

“Who knows?” He asked quietly. “Is that what you plan to do? When all this is over — you plan to stay in Kounan?”

Hikari bit her lip.

“I guess... I’ll go home.” She admitted. “I like Kounan, but... I don’t... it’s not... my family are... somewhere else.”

“Ah yes. In Tokyo.” Aoiketsu remembered, and Hikari nodded.

“Right.” She agreed. Aoiketsu raised a smile.

“Then I suspect Kounan will not be such a pleasant place to stay.” He reflected evenly. “Chichiri is kind to me, and so are his family. But I am wary — even frightened — of the bandit who rules Reikaku-zan and Shishi considers me nothing more than a nuisance. Myoume-san — she is... a strange individual that I don’t really know how to understand. *You* are the one who speaks to me with the most

kindness, and the only one I would dare call friend at present. If you are not staying in Kounan, there seems little point in me doing so either."

"Really?" Hikari looked startled, and Aoiketsu nodded.

"But perhaps, when this is over, Kutou might be a safe place to return to." He murmured, glancing down at the ring that glittered on the middle finger of his right hand. "I should like to go back... to speak to my mother, if not for any other reason. To visit her grave... not being able to do that is preying on my mind somewhat. Now more than ever, to be honest."

"I guess it must be odd, not knowing anything much about her." Hikari reflected as they made their way back towards the farmhouse. Aoiketsu nodded.

"I do not know what I am living up to. I only know vaguely what her hopes for me were." He admitted honestly. "And whether or not she would be proud of me... that bothers me, sometimes. Whether she can see me, and approve or disapprove of the man I am. She gave me this ring and my name — that is all I have to cling to. I know her identity, and she gave me life. But she's a ghost to me... they all are. I don't know anything about my past, really. I wish that I did."

"Chichiri said he met your mother. Maybe he'd know." Hikari suggested. "But he... he didn't say nice things about the Kaiga family. Aoi, you're gentle and kind — maybe you wouldn't like them, if you knew."

Aoiketsu shot her a startled glance, and Hikari pinkened slightly, shrugging her shoulders.

"From what he said." She amended. "I know that Nakago — that Kutou's Shougun was a violent man. I know he tried to kill both my parents and destroy... a lot of things. If my father hadn't brought him down, he might have killed yet more. I know those things. But... from what Chichiri said... I don't think Kaiga Gin was a very nice man, either."

Aoiketsu dropped his gaze.

"I hear such conflicting stories of everything that it's easy to be confused." He admitted. "Some in Kutou call Nakago a hero. Others a sadistic villain. And the same is said of Kaiga Gin — that he was a noble martyr to the old regime or that he was an evil, cruel individual. I know that he kept slaves, and yes, I suspect he was not a good person. But..."

“Noone deserves to be slaughtered in such a way as that.” Hikari said softly. “That’s why I think Nakago was a devil. Even if he did have good intentions. I haven’t talked to Father about it all, not really. I’ve heard what I know from Tasuki and Chichiri, since Papa doesn’t really talk about his Seishi days at all any more. Not now he’s not actively one of Suzaku’s chosen. But the war ended because he brought Nakago down. Had he not... so many more people would have died. Reizeitei-sama lost his father. Tasuki and Chichiri lost friends. Countless villagers died — soldiers on both sides, too. All because of the war Nakago started between Kounan and Kutou. But it seems like he killed a lot of people in his own land as well.”

“And Kutou remains in civil war. Yes.” Aoiketsu agreed, his expression troubled. “Though perhaps... we will never know whether that could have been avoided if Nakago had survived and had completed his vision — whatever that was.”

“You almost sound sympathetic to him.” Hikari sent him a startled glance, and Aoiketsu shook his head hurriedly.

“No, that’s not what I’m saying.” He said hastily. “Just that there are a lot of questions. My family were killed — but so was Nakago. I do not know who were the true villains, then. My enemies are not the dead... but the living. Just as yours are.”

Hikari’s eyes widened for a moment. Then she smiled, acknowledgement flickering in her eyes.

“You *are* smart.” She decided. “And you’re right. It doesn’t matter whether Kaiga Gin or Nakago was a worse villain. They’re both long gone. The problem is with Kutou’s current government, not the one that existed when my father was fighting for Kounan. And their choice of assassin.”

“Yes.” Aoiketsu agreed. “That man...”

He shook his head.

“Even if he is Myoume-san’s brother, I should dearly like to hear that he’d been caught by Reizeitei-sama’s imperial guard and sentenced as a traitor should be.” He admitted honestly. “I do not know Kounan’s policy in that regard — but considering the number of lives that creature has clearly used his Seishi power to end, surely only death itself could be a fitting punishment.”

He spoke fervently, and Hikari shrugged her shoulders.

“Probably, but don’t say that in front of Myoume.” She begged. “She still loves her brother, even though he’s a stupid, homicidal

moron. All of this messes her up too — she tried to prevent Jin from dying, but she couldn't and I know she feels pretty bad over it. Because after all it was Miramu who killed him — she calls it her blood debt, because of that. Don't make it worse on her, huh?"

"Don't worry. I won't." Aoiketsu smiled, and Hikari eyed him pensively.

"You know, your eyes are sort of like hers." She mused. "I didn't know people in the East could have blue eyes."

"Yes... they can." Aoiketsu looked surprised. "Obviously, since I do."

"Yeah, obviously." Hikari flushed, looking sheepish. "I didn't mean it in a bad way. They're nice eyes. I mean... well, they're just unusual, that's all. They're not quite as dark as Myoume's — they're a really pretty colour. I guess that's the reason for the 'Aoi' in your name, huh? Because you have blue eyes?"

"As a very small child, I was sometimes called Aoime." Aoiketsu agreed. "It is unusual for someone in the East, but not impossible."

"I suppose I should've known that. After all, Nakago had blue eyes, didn't he?" Hikari remembered. "Chichiri said as much... he called him a blue eyed avenger. I'm sorry. It's really just in Tokyo most people don't have that colour — I guess that's why I noticed. I'm just showing my ignorance about the East again... forget it."

Aoiketsu faltered, staring at her, and Hikari frowned, tilting her head as she eyed him quizzically.

"What now?" She asked. "Did I offend you or something?"

"No... nothing." Aoiketsu shook his head hurriedly, offering her a smile. "And we're dallying. We should hurry, before Shishi decides we're both too incompetent to even carry water between us."

"True." Hikari laughed. "Okay. You're right. And I'm hungry, anyway. Hot weather and poring over maps'll do that to you — although Chichiri says I've inherited my mother's appetite, so maybe that's true too. Aidou-san is such a good cook though — it's hard not to eat as much as possible. And we'll need it, if we're going North. As much energy as possible, if we're going to freeze again. Come on."

With that she set off ahead of him along the path towards the stone building and Aoiketsu hesitated for a moment, then set off after her, his mind still whirling over what she had said.

"Nakago... had blue eyes." He murmured. "I've known that my

whole life, but never thought of it like... but then, so did Gi Koyuu, because I've seen the paintings. Nakago's alleged father, the Shougun from the western borders who died in mysterious circumstances. Shit... but is that even possible? Hyoushin-sama did allude to... to a military heritage. That I... was... but could... could my mother have betrayed Kaiga Gin in quite that great a way? Was that what Miramu was hinting at, too, when he called me so bluntly on my eyes? Western settler or Hin — he even said that. Why *didn't* I think of it before? Maybe because it seems crazy! My blood did weaken Suiko's seal, but even so... *could* it have happened like that? Hell, is it Nakago's blood I have running through my veins?"

He glanced down at the Kaiga ring, still glittering in the hot Kounan sunlight.

"Is that it?" He wondered. "Is *that* the reason why Mother called me 'blue blood' after all?"

Almost two weeks, and still no signals from the South.

Hyoushin paced across his chamber, a frown on his face as he considered the reasons for the delay. In the time that Aoiketsu had been deployed in the south, he had received one brief written message in Maichu's clumsy, badly-formed handwriting just to confirm that everything was in place as it should have been. But since then there had been no indication of movement by the group in Kounan, and despite himself, Hyoushin was beginning to grow uneasy.

"If anything had happened to Aoiketsu, I'm sure that by now either Maichu or Kayu would have realised as much." He reflected, pausing to glance across the chamber towards the glass window that overlooked the imposing Southern Gate. Atop its rusty, stained spikes the heads of two fresh traitors had joined the already half-skeletal one of the man Hyoushin had decapitated with his own blade, and at the sight, the Meihi bit his lip, slowly shaking his head. The revolt had risen in the South, a territory which had been temperamental and insecure since the war with Kounan, and several of the Emperor's own men had been slain in the attempt to quell the violent rebellion. Somehow, the whole thing had seemed to be too convenient, both in its timing and its set-up, and although the Royal forces had managed to restore order, Hyoushin had been grieved to hear of the deaths of a couple of the Southern Regiment's most distinguished and loyal captains.

But then, he reflected darkly, such was the end result of living in Kutou — in a land where even now men resisted the attempts of the

Emperor to bring peace.

“Another uprising. Another rebellion.” He murmured. “More men dead. More traitors brought to face Imperial justice. But yet we delay... and all the time, that assassin lurks here in the shadows. At least if I knew what we were to do — but until we hear clearly from Aoiketsu about the Southern progress, we can’t risk leaving here. If this Hikari child is dangerous...”

He sighed, leaning up against the wall as he admitted to himself the true reason for his unrest.

“Ruiren-sama, I hope I haven’t sent your son to his death by taking this gamble.” He murmured. “I’ve always attempted to keep my word to you... I hope this lack of contact doesn’t mean that I’ve failed.”

He frowned, gathering his composure as he reached for his cape, pulling it around his shoulders as he prepared to venture across the palace complex towards the shrine of Seiryuu. Though as a matter of course he would not even think of seeking the Priest’s company, he knew that if he had received contact from Maichu it was just as likely that Kikei would have had communication from the more literate Kayu, and that in that document there might be some clue as to how they should proceed.

“So to Kikei it must be.” He reflected ruefully, as he crossed the stone slabs towards the blue-roofed building, saluting the guards on duty with an almost automatic gesture. “At least that western killer doesn’t appear to be in the vicinity today. I can’t decide whether his alignment with Kikei is comforting or disturbing — I suppose it depends entirely on how much control our lord Priest has over this man of Byakko we seem to be sheltering in our midst. I wonder if even Kikei knows what I suspect... that Miramu is not just an assassin but something far more dangerous? Perhaps I should address it with him before I speak of it to the Emperor.”

“Hyoushin?”

Kikei’s voice penetrated his thoughts as he stepped through the shrine entrance and he glanced up, meeting the aging priest’s gaze with his usual level one as he slowly inclined his head.

“Kikei-sama.” He murmured. “I trust I’m not inconveniencing you with my presence?”

“Is there some message from the Emperor?” Kikei asked, and Hyoushin shook his head.

“No, not at all.” He replied. “I’ve come of my own accord to speak

to you — if you can spare me a few moments of your time.”

“You’ve come voluntarily to Seiryuu’s shrine, seeking my company?” Kikei’s beady eyes narrowed. “And you aren’t wearing your sword at your waist, so there’s no violence in your intention. I’m surprised, Hyoushin. I didn’t think that, of all people, you had much faith in a man who spends his life pandering to a Dragon.”

“Indeed, I have my reservations about Kutou’s faith.” Hyoushin agreed evenly. “But I would not come armed to speak to a priest when not acting as my Emperor’s defender. Such behaviour seems improper — and I have no violent will towards you. We merely clash on matters of spiritualism, that’s all. In terms of politics, I trust we are little different in our desire to see Kutou secure.”

“I can’t argue.” Kikei admitted. “All right. I can spare you some time — I’ve finished my rituals for the morning for the souls of those lost in the southern skirmishes.”

He cast Hyoushin a sidelong glance.

“Koku Maru was among the dead, wasn’t he?” He asked slyly. “One of your proteges — I saw his name on the list when it was conveyed to me for absolution and blessing. Is that why you’ve come here, then? To pray for the soul of one of your best men, even though you don’t believe in Seiryuu’s protection?”

“I have not come here to pray.” Hyoushin shook his head. “Although it is true that Maru was among the dead, and that he was one of the finest captains I’ve ever seen deployed to a rough region like the South. I am a soldier at heart, Kikei, and I know that sacrifices in my King’s name are often necessary. Your prayers for the dead men will suffice — Maru among them.”

“I’m sure young Aoiketsu and his companions will be sad to hear of the man’s passing.” Kikei almost seemed to be enjoying the subject, Hyoushin decided, as he forcibly suppressed his instinctive dislike of the Hin priest. “They too were somewhat fond of him, I believe... but as you say, in the Emperor’s name, there is no better sacrifice.”

“Maru and the others will be honoured by Kintsusei-sama also.” Hyoushin kept a firm grip on his temper, eying the other man impassively. “As I said, this is not why I have come to seek you. In fact, it is on another matter entirely — I wish to know whether or not Hei Kayu has made contact with you since his deployment to the South.”

“Kayu?” Kikei looked startled. “Of course — haven’t *you* had

contact from your men, Hyoushin? Surely they are not so ill-trained as to omit to send word to their own Commander?"

"On the contrary, I have had word from Maichu that all has been begun well." Hyoushin shook his head. "But Maichu's penmanship is still limited, even after six years of schooling, and his note was necessarily brief and to the point. Thanks to your own tuition, Kayu's literacy is far better — I hoped perhaps he had given you a clearer view than the one Maichu has been able to give me."

"I see." Kikei smiled, spreading his hands. "And I suppose your own literacy is somewhat questionable too at times, is it not, my Meihi friend?"

"I am not as literate as I might be in the Chinese tongue, no." Hyoushin shook his head. "Although perhaps more so than you realise, Kikei-sama. If I might see Kayu's message, I would be grateful."

"Certainly, although I'm not sure what more it will tell you." Kikei beckoned for his companion to follow across the dimly lit chamber, flames flickering in sconces around the imposing statue of the gold dragon that arched before them in a gesture of defence. "Here it is. Brief, just as yours was — the risks of sending a written message detailing everything are great, after all. But if it's any more use to you than Maichu's was — be my guest."

"Thank you." Hyoushin took the scroll, unrolling it carefully as he ran his gaze slowly down the dark columns of Kayu's precise, neat Chinese script.

"Trading has begun in Kahou." He read slowly. "And communications to Eiyu are also running smoothly. The village apothecary has taken care of everything, just as we expected. Suzaku watches over our friend and he is safe. Our further travel plans now await his instruction — I will make contact when we have more information on the important consignment you have entrusted to us. Please convey this message to all who need to know. Hei Kayu."

He raised his gaze.

"As you said, he writes little more than Maichu has told me, and in just as vague a manner." He admitted. "It worries me that any more detailed communication may have been intercepted at the border — I know that Reizeitei-sama has increased his men there in recent weeks and I'd even had one report of potential border spies keeping a close eye on our movement. That none of them have yet infiltrated the country proper or the palace is a relief — but it's potentially a threat

we should consider. If we are able to send a man to Kounan, after all... and the trouble is that if such a spy did enter our company, it might put Aoiketsu, Maichu and Kayu in grave danger. They are good and loyal men, Kikei-sama... that concerns me most of all."

"I won't pretend not to be somewhat concerned about Kayu's well being." Kikei admitted, taking the scroll back and setting it down on a nearby shelf. "But I also have faith in his intelligence and his skill. He is not a fool, and I have always taught him to be discerning. If you have similar faith in Maichu and Aoiketsu, I think we will have little to worry about."

"Yes, you're right." Hyoushin nodded. "But that the South are making no moves either... this is strange, don't you think so? They've been one step ahead of us in some regards when we've gone to find previous Shinzahou. They made allies of both Amiboshi and Toroki. Why are they hesitating now?"

"Perhaps its as simple a fact as that they don't have any idea where the Shinzahou for Genbu is." Kikei shrugged. "Just like we don't."

"You've had no success on that front, then?"

"None whatsoever." Kikei agreed with a frustrated sigh. "We were fortunate, when it came to Seiryuu's that we had possession of Suiko's scale and she was able to give us some idea of how to find the treasure. And with Miramu's help... we've managed to secure both it and Byakko's treasure for Kutou. But we have no ties to the North."

"Not even the warrior known as Amiboshi?"

"He's obviously allied himself somehow with Kounan. To travel to see him would be a risk — and as Seiryuu's man, he wouldn't be any the wiser about Genbu's treasure anyway." Kikei shook his head. "I'm sure I already told you that."

"Perhaps you did." Hyoushin acknowledged. "But the truth remains that we are two weeks on from our return home and still have no workable strategy to go North. I am loath to leave without clear guidance from our agents in the South... but if communication is intercepted..."

"If necessary I will send Miramu south once more to discover what's going on." Kikei shrugged. "But I think it's probably just a matter of time before we hear something."

He offered the Meihi a slight smile.

"It's not like you to be so concerned about the safety of individual

soldiers.” He reflected. “Or even for you to be concerned at all. Are you letting cracks appear in your icy professionalism, Hyoushin?”

“Not at all.” Hyoushin shook his head. “I’m merely eager to serve the Emperor’s will and to do so as soon as is possible. People in Kutou continue to die while we sit here talking about possibilities... the sooner we can move out, the sooner we can stop that. This is my concern. Nothing else.”

“No latent fondness, then, for the boy called Aoiketsu?”

“Aoiketsu is a soldier just like any other.” Hyoushin met his gaze coolly. “He has been trained and will carry out his duties to the best of his ability.”

“Then we’ve nothing to worry about.” Kikei seemed amused, and Hyoushin frowned.

“And you would trust Miramu to cross the border south again, when he’s already potentially caused the Emperor problems with the killing in Sairou?” He asked lightly. Kikei shrugged.

“One dead bandit is nothing compared to the suffering of Kutou’s people.” He said plainly. “You know it and so do I. Kounan’s Emperor has made no move against us because of this event, either. It was carried out by a Western assassin, and it was not done on the orders of the East. Reizeitei-sama is not a foolish Emperor, by all accounts. He will not go to war with us over one dead mountain rogue.”

“Perhaps not, but even so, it concerns me that Miramu may not be so trustworthy as you believe.” Hyoushin said quietly. Kikei stared at him for a moment, then he laughed.

“I can control Miramu.” He said frankly. “He’s a simple individual to please — so long as he’s paid, he’ll do as he’s told. Don’t worry so much, Hyoushin. It’s really not like you. We’ll no doubt hear in a few days from one of the men in the South and then we’ll be able to formulate the best plan for you to travel once more into Hokkan. Genbu no Shinzahou is your only concern at the moment — the location of it, and the relic associated with it. I can’t give you any answers this time — but you have been to Hokkan before and you know the terrain. I’m sure that the Emperor’s faith in you is justified — when you choose, you can be useful, after all.”

“You flatter me, Kikei-sama.” Hyoushin said drolly, and Kikei snorted.

“You and I have no need to dance around one another with false niceties when the Emperor is not present.” He said frankly. “But in

this regard we are the same. We both seek to bring the power of the Shinzahou to Kutou. And therefore, whatever our personal sentiments, this is something on which we can and must join forces. I will continue to scour the records for any reference to Okuda Takiko and the Genbu no Shinzahou. And I will share with you communication from Kayu should any arrive. But you must trust me where the deployment of Miramu is concerned. He has been in my service a long time and I have no reason to doubt his reliability.”

“As a killer, perhaps.” Hyoushin agreed. “But what else is he, Kikei-sama? A man of the West with no ties to Kutou — what drives him to act on our behalf, anyway? He has secrets... do they not concern you, that you can’t possibly know what all those secrets are?”

“I don’t need to see into his soul to gain his obedience.” Kikei snorted. “He’s a paid killer, that’s all I need to know. And good at his job. His concern is money — the only reason he fights for Kutou is because I pay him well and now he has the Emperor’s favour, too. This paranoia you’re developing is unbecoming — you should discard it and worry about our real enemies instead.”

Hyoushin eyed him for a moment, realising from this short exchange that Kikei spoke in all honesty and that he did not know the truth about Miramu’s identity. He frowned, debating whether or not to reveal it, then, out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw the faintest brush of a shadow disappearing from the darkness of the shrine to the world outside and his eyes narrowed as he realised voicing his fears would do nothing except put both him and the Priest in danger.

“I’m sure you’re right.” He replied, bowing his head in acknowledgement. “Thank you, Kikei-sama. You’ve relieved my mind some. I trust it will be as you say — that we will have further news soon.”

With that he withdrew from the shrine, glancing around him as he looked for any sign of the assassin as he did so.

“Walking around without your sword is overly naive for you, surely, Hyoushin?” The familiar western tones jerked his head upwards and he raised his gaze, meeting the quizzical indigo eyes of the killer as Miramu squatted on the edge of the shrine roof. He frowned, shaking his head.

“It is not done to approach a priest armed, unless I am in my official role as Emperor’s protector.” He said softly. “You would know that, if you had spent more time considering and less time talking.”

“You seem concerned about my motives, too.” Miramu leapt down from his perch, landing neatly before the Meihi with barely a sound as he did so, black tail of hair falling over his shoulder as he offered Hyoushin a grin. “Do you not trust me, then? Or do you just consider that everything I say is a lie?”

“That would be the same as not trusting you, and you know already how I feel in that regard.” Hyoushin’s eyes narrowed. “What do you want, Miramu?”

“Nothing in particular.” Miramu shook his head. “Just to tell you that I’ve done well for Kutou so far. And I’ll keep doing so, as long as I’m paid to. But there are things I won’t tolerate — I’m a human being just as you are, after all. Perhaps more so, since I still possess my soul, damaged and twisted as it might be.”

He smiled, and Hyoushin was immediately on his guard, noting the glint of something sinister in the man’s indigo gaze.

“I delivered your Aoiketsu to Kounan at my own risk, and I also got the fang from Byakko’s shrine.” He said quietly. “On both occasions I came close to engaging in conflict with Toroki. You’re suspicious about my interest in her — well, you can stop being suspicious and forget about it. There is no further connection, now that Byakko’s treasure is in your hands. And as for anything else you might... theorise or suspect...”

He paused, and Hyoushin saw the faint glitter of a silver blade that had suddenly appeared between the assassin’s fingers.

“I don’t kill unnecessarily.” He added quietly. “And I don’t imagine you care too much about your own life. But whatever you think you know, Hyoushin, keep your thoughts to yourself. Because when you go to the North, your Emperor will have no one to protect him except an aging, rheumatic priest. I’m not his enemy — not yet. But that may well depend on you. You understand what I’m saying — don’t you?”

Hyoushin’s eyes glittered with icy rage, and Miramu laughed, clearly entertained.

“It’s a good thing you don’t have your sword with you, because I think you might have drawn it just then.” He reflected. “Perhaps I’ve finally found the way to make you truly angry, Hyoushin. So much to the better — but you can’t kill me, and you won’t defeat me if we came to fight. I am far, far stronger than you can imagine — far stronger than an ordinary tribesman, no matter how determined or loyal he is. So keep it in mind, Hyoushin. Whatever you think you know about me — forget about it. And everything will be just fine.”

Hyoushin glared at the assassin coldly.

“You threaten the Emperor’s life and I *will* slay you myself.” He said softly. “No matter what the sacrifice to do it, Miramu. No matter what manner of beast you are. I *will* kill you — mark my words.”

“Believe me, you have no idea what you are talking about.” Miramu snorted, and Hyoushin shook his head.

“You’re Byakko’s.” He said bluntly. “You hide it, and I wouldn’t know where you conceal your mark or what your other name might even be. But *your* blood rose Kitora. Not Toroki’s.”

“And this doesn’t scare you, this forbidden knowledge that might yet see you killed?” Miramu asked. Hyoushin curled his lip derisively.

“I’m a Meihi.” He said evenly. “I don’t bother about Beast Gods or their chosen warriors. You do not make me afraid, Miramu.”

“Then maybe I’ll have to do something to make you afraid.” Miramu suggested. “Or do you doubt that my threats are real?”

Hyoushin eyed him for a moment. Then he sighed, shaking his head.

“I will not speak of this to anyone, and you will not stain your hands with Imperial blood.” He said quietly. “For the time being, it serves noone to reveal this secret and your reasons for concealing it are not clear. Yet I warn you, Miramu — we are not allies and I am not bound by any threat you make. If harm befalls my Emperor I *will* be his vengeance. All your poison, all your quick moves and dark arts aside — I will still kill you. You may have Celestial strength, but you have no idea how strong a Meihi’s will to live can be.”

Miramu eyed him for a moment, then he smiled, bowing his head in vague acknowledgment of the soldier’s remark.

“Then we have a fun game ahead of us.” He reflected. “Very well. I look forward to having you as an enemy, Hyoushin.”

Chapter 3

Chapter Two

Well, so at last he had something to pass on to his friends.

Aoiketsu set aside his writing brush, glancing ruefully at the ink that stained the tips of his fingers as he brushed them absently against the dark fabric of his robes. Pulling the sheet of parchment towards him, he rested his elbow on the desk, his thick dark hair falling over onto the wood as he ran his gaze down the neat columns of Chinese characters. Inwardly he wondered whether or not Maichu would manage to read his message.

“But if he can’t, Kayu should be able to.” He reflected, remembering that his fellow soldier had also been educated at court from an equally young age as the favoured ward of the priest Kikei. It was through this that Aoiketsu had first become acquainted with Kayu, although the other boy’s superior years had put them somewhat apart in terms of their studies, and he had not come to know his fellow soldier until they had both progressed beyond basic military training. Even then there had been several pitched battles between them as young, heated tempers fought over the honour of their patrons within the noble court.

In general, most battles had gone Aoiketsu’s way, although Kayu had soon picked up on his comrade’s weakness for blood and on occasion had used it against him. Still, even now, remembering those things brought Aoiketsu no resentment towards his resolute ally.

“Even though Kayu and I weren’t always close friends, it’s comforting to know he’s nearby.” He realised with a rueful smile. “I feel that in the last year or so, as a team, we’ve all grown closer as soldiers and men. Regardless of whether I was Hyoushin-sama’s responsibility or whether Kayu was loyal to Kikei-sama — it no longer seems to matter quite so much. And Maichu’s not much further away than that — I don’t know which of them will be in town today. But that I need to make an excuse to get to Souun to pass on this message... I wonder whether or not anyone will find that suspicious. I can’t imagine that they’ll let me wander off alone, which means I’ll have to go with someone. And even though Hikari is the one with whom I’d rather go... she might notice. Hell, any of them might notice, if I’m suddenly in corners with a stranger passing paper.”

He sighed, re-reading his message for the third time.

"As yet the location of the Suzaku Shinzahou remains a mystery, although I think it's probable they do have it in their possession. However I've not yet been able to bring up the subject, as I don't want to make them suspicious of me too soon into the mission. I already have some concerns about the interest of the Byakko Seishi Toroki, although as yet I don't think she's realised my true reason for being in Kounan. For the time being, I believe my cover has gone unnoticed.

Thankfully the ring and the fact Chichiri once met Kaiga Ruiren seems to have proved my authenticity as an exiled noble of Kutou's court... and I'm doing my best to keep a low profile in terms of my fighting ability. Since parting company with Miramu I have successfully gained the trust of Suzaku's people and will be setting off for the Northern border with their party in the next day or so. I anticipate that we'll leave early in the morning and follow a forest path through the lakes of Kounan towards the town of Choukou, which should likely take about three days to reach if my estimates are correct. Having seen the map of the area, I believe that to be likely, and suggest a rendezvous in this city where I will pass on any new information to whichever one of you is on relay duty. Please convey to the Commander that I'm safe and that I'm undertaking the duty he placed on me to the best of my ability.

"As to the girl, whose full and correct name is Sukunami Hikari, information seems to be guarded. Although I have discovered her kinship to Tamahome, the man who slew the Shougun, I've been able to discover little more. All I can tell you is that her father still lives yet no longer fights for Kounan — at least, not in the guise of a Shichi Seishi. I don't quite understand what that means, but maybe Kikei-sama will, if this information is passed to him. I've also managed to glean the fact that she comes from a city called Tokyo, although all my scouring of maps hasn't made me any the wiser as to where it is. All I've learnt is that it's a long way away. That Hikari is somehow involved in Suzaku's push for the Shinzahou is undeniable, but her true purpose has not yet become clear. She appears like an ordinary girl to me, with no significant fighting ability or strength. Still, I will keep up my observations and make report in Choukou if I discover more on the journey North.

"Finally, the Emperor of Kounan is an astute man and seems to be acutely aware of things happening even around the bandits' mountain. He sent men to this place to honour the bandit who Miramu killed in Sairou. Therefore he knows that a man of Kounan was killed and the circumstances of that death. It seems that the boy who died was closely associated with the Suzaku warrior Tasuki and his family... please, please make sure the Commander is aware of this fact as I think any further unplanned deaths might spell serious problems for Kutou and Kintsusei-

sama. It seems that this Rou Jintsui was not just any other bandit, but one charged with the Emperor's bidding.

More at this time I can't tell you. But be prepared to pass the message home that Suzaku will soon be on the move."

He sighed, reaching for the brush again as he added the characters that made up his name at the foot of the sheet. Then he got to his feet, gazing out of the window as he heard the excited yells and cries of Chichiri's two small children running around outside as they tended to the many thriving crops. He sighed, leaning up against the wooden frame.

"It must be nice to grow up a proper child, like that." He murmured aloud, a wistful note entering his tones as he envied their carefree abandon. "If only Kutou could one day be like this, then I'd have nothing more to hope for."

He turned back to the desk, picking up the scroll and shaking it to ensure the ink had dried. In the warmth of Kounan's sun it had done so almost instantly, however, and with a wry smile he folded it, slipping it into the folds of his clothing as he took his writing implements and placed them carefully in the small crevasse between the wall and the low-slung bed that had become his since his arrival in Kounan. It was not fancy, for the Ri family were neither rich nor poor, but as a soldier of Kutou, he had had far worse accomodation and there was something about the brightly lit chamber that he knew he'd miss when they set out on their travels.

"I'm going soft, but I'm starting to like this place." He reflected sheepishly. "I need to get that in check. Kounan have been Kutou's enemies for a long time... and even if the last war brought them peace, that's not the point of my being here. They seek to stop us achieving the same ideal... I mustn't grow too fond of anything in Kounan. After all, they got this at our expense."

He cast a glance at his reflection in the mirror, frowning as he took in his appearance. Despite the necessity of his facade, he found he disliked the man that stared back at him. The loosely fastened tails of dark hair that fell lazily over his shoulder gave him an air of noble pretension that he had never aspired to once while growing up under the weight of the Kaiga name, and the robes that he had insisted on wearing made him feel self-conscious and stupid with their lack of functionality. And yet he knew that, if he was to change his clothes to ones which were more familiar and comfortable, he would find it twice as hard to remember who he was supposed to be.

He reached up to finger one of the trailing white hair ties, a wry smile touching his features.

“I really do look like some weak, stuck up idiot.” He decided. “No wonder Shishi gives me such a hard time of it. I don’t blame her — I’d probably feel the same, if I were her. But it isn’t easy, pretending to be the fool quite as much as this. It’s hard work... especially remembering to speak properly and not to give away the fact I’ve been fighting for most of my life. But dammit, what I wouldn’t give to be able to tie my hair up like a proper soldier and not have to look like such a girlish freak!”

As he stood there, eying himself disparagingly, he caught sight of his own seiran gaze and he frowned.

“Blue eyes.” He murmured. “Are they really the eyes of the Shougun of Kutou? Or am I way off base? I wish I knew... I wish I was in Kutou and could ask Hyoushin-sama straight out. I think if I did, he’d tell me. But I can’t... and it’s definitely not something I can pass in a message through Kayu and Maichu like this. It’s something... if it’s true, I don’t know how I feel about it. But I’m already taking enough risks by being here and being of Kutou’s blood. Reizeitei-sama may have offered me sanctuary but if he suspected I was the blood son of the man who slew his father I’m sure he’d throw me in chains. From how he spoke... the wound is still there.”

He sighed.

“I don’t know what to think of the death of a father I never met, whether it be Kaiga Gin or Nakago — or some other man completely.” He realised. “But just from a moment’s meeting with Kounan’s Emperor I could tell that he held his father’s memory very dear indeed. It almost made me ashamed... that I’ve always been so focused on the living, and not the dead. That even the times I’ve been to visit Mother’s grave, it’s generally been looking for answers about why she’s buried where she is. Not because I just wanted to see her... or spend time near her in some way.”

He frowned, turning away from the mirror.

“Perhaps I’ve just been fighting too long and I’ve become cold to the past.” He wondered. “Because dead enemies can’t hurt you... only living ones can get up and attack a second time. Maybe that’s just it. But being here, in this place, with the way they revere that Jin kid and the memory of the dead Suzaku Seishi — I don’t know. It’s like their atmosphere is starting to penetrate me too.”

He sank down on the bed, rubbing his temples as if trying to clear

his thoughts.

“Whatever the truth, it doesn’t matter right at the moment.” He told himself at length. “For now, I’m Kaiga Aoiketsu on a mission I mustn’t fail to complete. And that’s all that’s important — nothing else is. For the sake of Kutou — that’s what I must do!”

“There’s still no sign of your brother’s chi in the surrounding area?”

At the sound of the sorcerer’s voice, Myoume glanced down from her perch in one of the thriving trees that flanked the Ri estate, shaking her head as she offered him a rueful grimace. Since dawn she had been hidden there, as she flung all her sensors wide across the landscape for any indication that Miramu was still in Kounan. But, no matter how hard she tried, she could locate no trace of the enigmatic assassin’s movements and if she was honest with herself, she did not know whether to be pleased or concerned by this state of affairs.

“I feel like a cat, sitting up here like this, but it’s the best way to get a clear sweep of the land.” She said now with a sigh. “I suppose it’s not all that strange, for one of Byakko’s to be acting like a kitten climbing trees. But it’s useless anyway, as it happens. I don’t think Miramu’s still in Kounan at all. I think he’s long gone, Chichiri... although I can’t guarantee that he won’t come back.”

“So long as you can take care of Hikari, Shishi and our new waif and stray in Hokkan, Tasuki and I will worry about the south.” Chichiri said, spreading his hands as he raised his ruby gaze to hers. “Take a rest, Myoume-chan. You’ve been very diligent in your desire to protect us, but we’re not entirely helpless, you know.”

“I know that.” Myoume admitted, leaping deftly down onto the pathway as she brushed stray leaves and twig-ends from her clothing. “But Miramu’s crossed too many lines and I feel responsible. I should be able to stop him — somehow all of this seems like it’s my fault.”

“You’re not responsible for his actions, you know.” Chichiri said softly, and Myoume sighed, shrugging her shoulders.

“I feel as though I am.” She replied wearily. “Because if I’d never told him about my vision — about us fighting one another — perhaps he wouldn’t be so dead set on making it come true.”

“Do you think that’s what he’s doing?” Chichiri eyed her quizzically, and Myoume faltered, meeting the sorcerer’s pensive gaze with a startled one of her own.

“Chichiri?”

“It seems to me that your brother is going out of his way to *avoid* meeting you.” Chichiri observed. “As if he’s trying to prevent your vision — not confirm it.”

“Either way it doesn’t matter.” Myoume rubbed her temples. “He’s told me we’re not siblings any more — that he’s not Amefuri, nor is he my brother. He’s just Miramu, the Shadow of the West. It didn’t sound like he had any latent sentimentality for our relationship or for anything else. Whatever his plans are, Chichiri — I don’t understand them. And when I remember Jin’s sacrifice... I want to do my best to help the south. Whatever else is or isn’t true, Miramu is a member of my family and he killed someone he should not have killed. Since he won’t make amends for it — I will do it in his place. So much as that can ever be achieved.”

“It’s a heavy burden.” Chichiri remarked, and Myoume nodded.

“But I’m not weak.” She assured him. “You needn’t worry about me. I’ve had a long time to get used to this strange state of affairs where my brother is concerned. And I know that I have to follow this path — you shouldn’t be afraid that I’ll buckle or turn against Kounan because of my blood ties.”

“I don’t think I’ve had that feeling at all, since you’ve been here.” Chichiri admitted. “I remember meeting Tokaki, Subaru and Tatara in the deserts of Sairou when we were on a different quest for the Shinzahou, a long, long time ago. Byakko’s people were folk we could trust in completely. And you’re just the same way as they were. I didn’t have the fortune to meet Toroki in her past life — but it’s nice to meet her in this. After all, Seishi are a rare and endangered breed — and few people really understand what that means.”

“How true that is.” Myoume admitted ruefully. “All right. Thank you for placing that trust in me, at the very least. I won’t let you down. When we leave, I’ll keep them all safe — I’m sure of it.”

She pursed her lips, eying the sorcerer keenly.

“Chichiri, what do you make of Aoiketsu?”

“Aoi?” Chichiri looked startled. “Why — is there something that I should know?”

“I’m not sure, yet.” Myoume admitted. “And I haven’t liked to voice my feelings in front of Shishi or Hikari, because of the conclusions I know they’ll jump to. Jin’s death is still fresh in their minds, after all. But even so...”

Chichiri’s good eye narrowed thoughtfully as he interpreted the

implication in her words.

“You think his arrival in Kounan is not coincidental, don’t you?” He murmured, and Myoume nodded her head.

“I’m almost certain of it.” She agreed. “Although I don’t think he’s told us lies about his name and his birth, Chichiri — I don’t think that he’s been entirely truthful with us in other ways.”

“I see.” Chichiri leant up against the trunk of the tree, folding his arms across his chest as he seemed to be digesting this. “It’s funny you should say that, actually. His resemblance to Kaiga Ruiren and his possessing that ring both suggest his story is authentic, but nonetheless when we found him I was struck by his expression — his eyes, particularly. I felt I’d seen them before. It bothered me... though like you I haven’t mentioned it to anyone. Normally I would have told Tasuki and asked his opinion, but right now I daren’t — his emotions are too raw following Jin’s murder and no matter what his errand among us, I don’t want to see Aoiketsu burnt to a crisp before he’s had a chance to clear matters up. Still... this may yet prove to be a problem.”

He tilted his head on one side, looking thoughtful.

“You think he’s a spy for Kutou, then?”

“Yes, I think so.” Myoume nodded her head.

“And what, exactly, has he come here to spy on?”

“That I’m not so sure about — but I think it’s possibly Hikari.” Myoume bit her lip. “On the way back from Sairou, after Jin’s death, Shishi told me something of what happened in the cave before Hikari disappeared. Apparently she glittered with Suzaku’s light before that, to free herself from Miramu’s grasp and he saw it. He accused her of being one of Suzaku’s Seishi, which she denied. But I can’t imagine my brother hasn’t passed that information on to whoever’s paying his fees. And they’d be remiss not to follow it up.”

“Then this *does* pose us a problem, doesn’t it?”

Chichiri sighed.

“It would be a bad idea for the East to know who Hikari really was just yet. It might prove dangerous and I don’t want to have her hurt.”

“Well, that’s the other thing I want to talk to you about.” Myoume admitted. “Chichiri — how much faith do you have in my ability to see things that haven’t yet happened?”

“Since you saw Jin’s death before it occurred, I can’t really doubt you.” Chichiri responded. “Why? You have some other prediction to make?”

Myoume frowned.

“It’s not a new image.” She said slowly. “Most of the things that have happened recently I’ve known about in fits and starts since I was a young child. They just float aimlessly around my brain, scraps of information that only pull together into something more coherent as other visions come true. It’s like putting together a puzzle — it’s a slow and painstaking process. Nevertheless, just like with a puzzle, the pieces will not fit the wrong places. In the end, when it becomes clear, there is only one possible interpretation. The trouble is that the event is generally upon me before I get that clarity of sight.”

“It sounds frustrating.” Chichiri remarked, and Myoume smiled ruefully.

“That’s one way to put it.” She agreed. “And at the moment I have scraps of information yet again. But they’ve begun to weave together into something... Chichiri, even though I’m sure that Aoiketsu’s arrival here is not coincidental, I want to take him with us to Hokkan. More, I want us to continue to shelter him as if we don’t suspect a thing.”

“All right...” Chichiri paused, then, “Will you tell me your reasons why?”

“Yes, but for now I think it would be better if you didn’t share them with anyone else.” Myoume said softly. “You sense chi just like I do — whereas Tasuki doesn’t seem quite so proficient at it, and Hikari’s spiritual ability seems limited to tracking Suzaku Seishi — noone else. But you must have felt something unusual in Aoiketsu’s aura. Something... dare I call it... divine?”

Chichiri’s lips twitched into a smile and he nodded his head.

“I wondered if you might be going to mention that.” He agreed. “Yes, I’d felt it. Although it confused me. Those eyes, that spirit... Myoume, are you trying to tell me that that boy is a Seiryuu Seishi reincarnated, just as you are Byakko’s Toroki?”

He hesitated, then shook his head.

“No, more specific even than that.” He amended. “Since those eyes... and his chi... it’s something more familiar to me than that. The sensation is unique and unmistakable, but... are you suggesting that he’s somehow *Nakago* reborn into a new form?”

“No, he’s not a Seishi reborn.” Myoume shook her head. “Aoi’s too old for that to be the case. But you’re not far from the truth — it is Nakago’s essence that you’re sensing. The Kutou Shougun’s blood *does* run through him... as surely as does Kaiga Ruiren’s.”

“So he’s Nakago’s *son*, then.” Chichiri’s ruby eye darkened thoughtfully. “Yes, that accounts for it. It’s good to know that even at this age my senses aren’t so easily fooled.”

“At this age.” Myoume echoed. Then she snorted, shaking her head.

“You’re maybe twice my age, but you act as sharp as if you turned twenty yesterday.” She reproached him. “So don’t pretend otherwise — you don’t fool me one bit.”

“I didn’t imagine that I would.” Chichiri said calmly. “But the fact of the matter is that I’m *not* twenty — not any more. Not even thirty. Forty two summers have passed since I took my first breath, you know. And I remember that the Byakko warriors I once knew had to gamble with time and form to regain their strength in order to help us. It’s nice to know that I haven’t reached that situation yet. After all, all men want to protect their family. And this man has a bigger family to protect than most.”

“Considering the chi you have, Chichiri, I wouldn’t worry about burning it out any time soon.” Myoume said acidly. “And if we manage to succeed in all of this, it might not be so important to protect Kounan’s people, anyway. But if you can pick up a hint of an old enemy dead almost twenty years in a boy you’ve just met, there’s nothing wrong with your spiritual wits. Believe me — whatever games my brother has played with you and your family in the past, you’re more than his equal when it comes to Seishi strength — with twice as much experience to draw on.”

“You’re uncanny.” Chichiri stared at her, then smiled, inclining his head to acknowledge her correct train of thought. “I suppose Toroki’s sight really is far-reaching. Yes, that’s been my concern too — to defend against one I’m not able to detect. But for the time being, lets leave Miramu to his own devices. We were talking about Aoi.”

“So we were.” Myoume nodded. “And that does seem the more immediate problem to resolve.”

“Definitely, you know.” Chichiri pursed his lips. “To be truthful, I thought I was beginning to lose myself a little bit, when I felt what I did from his chi. Those eyes... when he first came round and saw me, I felt a chill go through me... like I’d met the eyes of a ghost somehow. I’ve never seen eyes like that in another individual and I’ve

met many in my life. It's not just the shade — your own are similar in colour, if maybe a little darker. But something else... something in their expression that struck me. Like they were truly... *Seiryuu's* eyes."

He glanced at his hands, twisting the edge of his *kesa* absently between his fingers as he considered the problem with his usual meticulous care. Myoume watched him intently, waiting for him to continue, for even in the short time they had known one another she had come to realise that a good deal of wisdom came from the quirky sorcerer's more serious observations.

"I suppose... what threw me was the fact there's no cold hate in Aoiketsu's eyes." He said eventually. "There are a lot of other things — determination, focus, intelligence... spirit. But he doesn't seem to have inherited Nakago's twisted sense of the world. Do you think even he knows the truth of who he is?"

"I don't know, yet." Myoume admitted. "I don't think that Aoi's heart is composed of hate — I don't think he's that kind of boy, or that he's really wanting to cause anyone harm by doing this. But that doesn't change the situation. He has Nakago's blood and he's here on Kutou's behalf — I'm sure that that's the truth."

"And information we *should* really keep to ourselves, considering everything else." Chichiri glanced up at the sky, and Myoume could tell that he was running all the options over in his mind. "Even from Tasuki, at the present time. When he's calmer, I'll discuss it with him — but now is not the best time."

He eyed the prophet keenly.

"You still haven't told me why we're protecting him, however. I'll believe in your judgement, Myoume — but I'd like to know your motivation in full."

Myoume smiled, spreading her hands.

"I didn't know Nakago's son was called Kaiga Aoiketsu or anything more about him until I saw him in your home the day you rescued him." She admitted. "But when I saw him, I knew another piece of my puzzle had slipped into place. Aoiketsu is a spy for Kutou, but he's more important a person than that, Chichiri. He will not betray Hikari's identity to his country — I'm absolutely certain of it. More, his connection to the girl is significant somehow. In my vision, Nakago's son was a *defender* of Suzaku's Shinzahoo, not an enemy."

She shrugged.

"If we take him with us, he will probably betray his own deception

soon enough.” She added. “But I still want him to come. Contrary to how he acts, the boy is as skilled a soldier as his father, and I’ve no doubt that in his own way he’ll come to protect those around him with the same spirit as you or Tasuki do. He’s connected to Hikari — I can’t define that yet, I just know that it’s true. And that if he comes with us, there’ll be an occasion where his presence will be key. This journey isn’t a safe one and things will threaten us as we travel. Hikari in particular. Aoiketsu’s being there may be the difference between life and death.”

Chichiri looked startled for a moment. Then he grinned.

“You’re somewhat manipulative, aren’t you?” He murmured. “The poor boy — he has no idea what he’s messing with.”

“He has secrets and he wants to keep them from us, so we’ll let him for the time being.” Myoume’s indigo eyes glittered with innocence. “Besides, don’t you think that it’s healthy for the children of once warring factions to form an alliance? Tamahome slew Nakago, yet I think Hikari and Aoi are already on the way to becoming friends. And I’ve a feeling that’s important... that this has always been about more than just Suzaku’s quest.”

“It’s an attempt to save everything. Not just Kounan.” Chichiri agreed, and Myoume nodded.

“I’m still patching together the other things that I’ve seen.” She told him. “And as we travel, I’m sure more will become clear. But for now I’m willing to trust Aoi, and that the information he passes on to Kutou is less of a risk to Hikari than not having him with us on our journey.”

“Well, you’re in charge of this trip, this time.” Chichiri bowed his head playfully towards her. “It’s in your hands, Toroki-san. If you think that way, I’ll trust in your judgement.”

“Thank you.” Myoume’s eyes lit up with relief. “I’m glad you feel that way.”

“Do you think the boy is cooperating with your brother, then? Or is Miramu truly a threat to his life?”

“I don’t know.” Myoume admitted. “But I don’t think Aoi has any fondness for Miramu from what I can see. No, I suspect they’re not allies... although I also suspect that Miramu is not out for Aoi’s blood in the way he’d like us to believe he is. Besides, as I said, the boy can fight. He’s just putting up a smokescreen — and without my sight and your senses, it would probably fool everyone.”

“Yes, he’s not doing a bad job of it.” Chichiri admitted. “I hadn’t perceived that he was a fighter — although maybe I should have done, considering the other things.”

“His fingers are calloused, and he keeps that concealed as much as he can.” Myoume grinned. “But he knows how to use a sword — I’d stake a lot on that fact.”

She sighed, stretching her arms over her head.

“In fact, I may be betting Hikari’s life on it.” She added. “If the things I suspect to be true are really going to happen the way I expect.”

“I hope that’s somewhat melodramatic.” Chichiri scolded. “Because we can’t delay your leaving much longer. The East may well be waiting for word from Aoiketsu before they move, and sooner or later he’ll have to pass on that word. If he has contacts nearby, then he must be preparing to meet with them before you leave.”

“Yes, I think so.” Myoume nodded her head. “And I think we might as well get that over with as soon as we can. We still need some supplies, after all — and I’ve promised to protect the boy, so it won’t seem odd if I ask him to come with me to Souun to collect them. I’ll keep an eye on him and make sure he has adequate time to pass whatever message he has on to his companions... that way we won’t get Hikari and Shishi involved just yet. After all, as I said, them knowing would probably mean Aoi’s not coming with us. And I think that would be a potentially fatal decision.”

“I really hope it’s not so serious as you make it sound, after what befell Jin in Sairou.” Chichiri sighed. “But if it’s that way, then take him by all means. As you said, you’re his protector against Miramu, so he might even expect you to want to take him with you.”

“I didn’t encounter Aoi in Sairou, Chichiri — but I did encounter companions of his and one of them at least I’ve sensed in this village recently.” Myoume’s expression became serious. “There are problems in that camp — troubles even I don’t understand. Probably things about which Aoi knows nothing.”

“Kutou is once more rotting from the inside out?” Chichiri asked, and Myoume nodded.

“Yes, but it’s not the Emperor’s doing.” She responded grimly. “It’s something else. Something I can’t completely fathom right at the moment. I will get to the bottom of it — hopefully I can learn something from Aoi’s half-truths in the process. But I think there’s a

greater enemy threatening us than one spy bent on a patriotic errand. That darkness within Kutou — that soul who lacks the guidance and disdains the presence of the Four Gods — *that* is our enemy. Byakko willing, that's what I have to see more clearly. Before it's too late for all of us."

Chapter 4

Chapter Three

It had been a long and tiring ride.

Kayu dismounted his horse, a flood of relief washing through him as he gazed up at the familiar blue-marble pillars that flanked the entrance to the Palace of Kutou. For a moment he just stood there, absorbing the fact he was back in home territory. Then, as he remembered the sheet of parchment he had carried so carefully from the Southern mountains, he gathered his wits, leading the beast through the gate and into the main palace courtyard. At once he was greeted by stable-workers, who, on seeing that he was bent on Imperial business were quick to take the tired animal from him, and as Kayu hurried up the steps to the palace's main inner conclave he realised that, despite his concerns, everything had operated as clockwork.

Maichu had met with Aoiketsu in the local mountain town of Souun two days earlier, and although they had had no time to talk, the young spy had been ready and prepared for he had passed a written document into his fellow soldier's hands. Maichu had immediately ridden to Kahou to meet with his friend and the two of them had discussed the message carefully and in some detail before Kayu had volunteered to make the long day's gallop across open Kounan country towards the Eastern border. In truth, he reflected, as he gave his name to the guards on duty and told them his errand, he had not even minded the strain on his blisters. To be back in Kutou was a relief, not a worry — and now, at last, he could properly make his report.

"Enter, Hei Kayu." The guards returned at that point, saluting him as they gestured for him to pass. "The Emperor has been expecting you."

"Of course." Kayu nodded his head, forcing his tired, aching feet to mount the final steps to the royal quarters. As he stepped through the doorway, he dropped to his knees, raising his gaze to meet the anxious, expectant eyes of his King.

"Welcome home, Hei Kayu." The Emperor spoke in soft, measured tones. "I'm glad to see you made it through the border safely."

"It wasn't easy, but thanks to the maps Hyoushin-sama gave us, I

was able to find a way past Reizeitei-sama's border patrols." Kayu admitted. "I'm here to make report, Kintsusei-sama — on the progress of the mission Maichu, Aoiketsu and I were dispatched on from Hengei two weeks ago."

"Then make your report, Kayu." Hyoushin's soft tones started the young soldier momentarily, as he registered the presence of the Commander in the furthest corner of the room. "I'm glad to hear that the maps were of use — and like the Emperor, to see you safely back in Kutou. But I hope you have some information to impart about the men of the South."

"Yes and no, sir." Kayu admitted, gathering his wits as he reached into his pocket for the folded sheet of parchment. He glanced at the Emperor, who gestured that he could stand and approach them, and Kayu scrambled to his feet, unfolding the paper as he held it out to his King.

"Aoiketsu deposited this with Maichu in Souun two days ago." He explained, as the Emperor took it carefully, glancing at it then back at the soldier. "I think it's probably the closest thing to an official report we have at present. Maichu and I talked it over and we decided that, if Aoi's going to be moving, we should be moving with him. And also, that sending communications back to Kutou would be easier that way — that it would be better if I returned here with the information gathered so far. We thought that it would be less suspicious if one supposed merchant was trailing the party rather than two, and in order to ascertain Aoiketsu's safe arrival in the Eastern Village I was forced to travel there and speak to some of the people. My face is therefore better known to the Southerners — Maichu will have better luck in tracking their path."

"I see." Hyoushin's expression became thoughtful, and Kayu glanced at him doubtfully. "That does indeed seem to be forward thinking."

"If they are willing to take Aoiketsu with them on their travel north, so much to the better." Kintsusei glanced up from the letter that he had been carefully reading. "And the indication from this is that he's gained their trust completely. Although he's taken something of a risk to write this, deep within the heart of enemy territory. I understand why, but even so, word of mouth is less easy to track down and the last thing we want is the south to be aware of our ploys."

He tapped the parchment absently.

“Especially if, as the boy says, Reizeitei is interested in what they do.”

“May I read the letter, Kintsusei-sama?” Hyoushin asked, and Kintsusei nodded, holding it out. Hyoushin took it, glancing at it, and pursing his lips as he scanned his gaze down the columns of carefully inscribed characters.

“I am not able to read everything he says.” He admitted. “However I can get the idea of his message. It seems the death of the bandit — this Rou Jintsui — was a potentially dangerous error on Miramu’s behalf. Kintsusei-sama — he must be put under greater control if we are to use his capabilities any further.”

“I don’t think sending Miramu to Hokkan with you when you leave will be a good idea.” Kintsusei agreed. “He’s far too well known to the Southerners and it seems he’s under greater control here in Kutou, when he’s directly under Kikei’s gaze. Don’t worry, Hyoushin. I won’t be sending him on this mission.”

“Kintsusei-sama, Aoiketsu said that the girl — the Hikari girl — was Tamahome’s daughter.” Kayu added. “And he thinks that’s the reason she’s been so involved in all of this in the first place.”

Kintsusei nodded his head.

“So he mentions in his letter.” He agreed. “Kayu, if you’ve been to the village — do you have the impression that he has been accepted by Kounan’s people? Especially if Toroki is indeed now among them... what were your thoughts, when you observed him there?”

“I think he has been accepted.” Kayu admitted. “He was within the house of the apothecary — the Suzaku warrior Chichiri — and he seemed to be in the company of the Hikari girl, too. She seemed totally unsuspecting of either him or me — she believed I was some kind of merchant on my way to Eiyuu, and she didn’t question me any further than that. As for Aoi, she took him off with her to see some mountain or other quite happily.”

His lips twitched into a smile as he remembered his friend’s attire.

“Mind you, considering the way Aoi was dressed, I’m not surprised that they’re not suspicious of him.” He added. “Without his sword and with his hair all over the place he looks more like a girl than ever. He definitely doesn’t look like a soldier... you wouldn’t imagine he’d ever held a weapon in his life before.”

“Then his ruse has been successful?” Hyoushin asked, and Kayu nodded.

"I think so. That was the impression I got." He agreed. "Yes."

Hyoushin's amethyst eyes glittered with faint irony as he seemed to consider this. Then he inclined his head.

"Who would have thought that the name of Kaiga would prove so useful." He murmured, and Kintsusei shot him a rueful glance.

"As you say." He agreed. "But it seems that all is well. The things he's observed are important — the information about Tamahome and his apparent exclusion from this business is something I'll pass to Kikei in case he can make any sense of it. I don't know what this Tokyo place is — but perhaps he does, being more knowledgeable about the Celestial Warriors than any of us."

"It means nothing to me either, Heika." Hyoushin admitted. "And I am certain that, if Aoiketsu says it is not sketched on any map, it is indeed not marked. Perhaps this is a form of Southern security — maybe Tamahome has sustained some grave injury or disease which prevents him from undertaking his comrades' fight. If he's not involved, his actual location is unimportant — however, there must be some reason why his daughter is able to take his place."

His expression became pensive.

"I have often wondered about the children of Seishi and whether or not they carry any latent stellar ability through their blood." He admitted, and Kayu saw the Emperor's eyes widen with comprehension as if there had been an unspoken message in the Meihi's even, impassive words. "Perhaps I have been right to wonder so."

"You mean they might have inherited stellar magic too, sir?" Kayu looked uneasy. "Because it's not just this Hikari, in the south. Chichiri has family too, and there's the bandit — Tasuki. His daughter is involved in this too."

"Not to mention Reizeitei." Kintsusei said soberly. "Until recently it's not something that I'd thought much about — I thought that the blood of the Chosen died with them. But... events have begun to persuade me to the contrary. Perhaps you're right, Hyoushin. Maybe that is the reason this Hikari girl is involved when her father is not. She's inherited something from him — and is perhaps not as unassuming as Aoiketsu so far believes."

"This has to be the theory we work on, I think." Hyoushin nodded gravely. "Until Maichu can relay further information back to us. Kayu, tell me, what arrangements did the two of you make regarding that

fact?”

“In his letter, Aoi asks to meet with one of us in Choukou, in about three or four days.” Kayu replied. “He seemed to think that leaving the mountains was fairly imminent, so when I left for here, Maichu was making preparations to quit Eiyuu and move north. That way he can wait for Aoi in this Choukou city, and be ready for his report.”

He smiled.

“Maichu also said that he’d try and arrange with Aoi then another meeting before they cross Hokkan’s border.” He added. “We studied the map and it seems that there’s a village near a mountain pass that looks quiet and subtle enough for that kind of thing — a place called Yukigase. He was going to ask Aoi about the possibility of meeting there — and then, of course, he’ll cross into Hokkan.”

“Then he must rejoin us there.” Hyoushin decided. “And report to us directly on his findings in Choukou and Yukigase. I will arrange for a discreet message to be awaiting him in Choukou to that end — that he ride direct from Yukigase to join us in Touran... where I feel by that time we will surely be.”

“Will you want me to convey that to him, sir?” Kayu asked, and Hyoushin hesitated for a moment, eying his young subordinate. Then he shook his head.

“The South may recognise you, if you’ve drawn very close to their base near Souun.” He said. “No, Kayu. You have done extremely well, but I think I’ll send a less distinctive herald to pass this message on.”

“Then all seems to be going according to plan.” Kintsusei’s eyes flickered with relief. “I’m glad Aoiketsu has successfully infiltrated Kounan — although I didn’t really doubt his ability to do so. Still, his words about Reizeitei will stick with me — if he is so astute as to honour a dead bandit for services rendered, we must be very careful not to kill anyone else significant. Even when we come to assemble the Shinzahoo — we don’t seek war with Kounan. And whatever their motives for opposing us — we don’t want to fight them if there’s an alternative. We just seek peace for Kutou... and that must be our first priority.”

He smiled, resting his hand on Kayu’s shoulder.

“Kikei has always told me that you would one day make a fine ally.” He murmured. “Today you have made his words ring true, Hei Kayu. This was well done, and I am glad of it.”

Kayu’s heart swelled with pride at this, and he bowed his head.

“As my Emperor commands it.” He murmured, and Kintsusei sighed.

“If only all of Kutou felt like that.” He reflected. “But still, at the moment it can’t be helped.”

“Kintsusei-sama — what are your instructions, then, for our departure to Hokkan?” Hyoushin asked quizzically. “I trust that we’ll be leaving soon, now we know the South’s position about as well as we can do.”

“I think so. At dawn tomorrow seems best.” Kintsusei agreed. “Kayu, you will be rested and ready to join your comrades by that time, I trust?”

“Sire?” Kayu started, glancing at his King in surprise, and Kintsusei’s smile widened.

“You’re in my trust, Hei Kayu, and I am relying on you and your comrades to give Hyoushin my every support.” He said softly. “I realise you’ve done nothing but ride and conceal your whereabouts for the past two weeks and I’m sure that it’s not always been an easy task. However, I would not like Hyoushin to leave Kutou without you.”

Kayu’s eyes widened, and he nodded.

“Yes, sire. I’m fine. I’ll do as you command — I’ll go to Hokkan, if that’s what you wish. I just wondered if I was still needed in the South — but if I’m more needed in the North...”

“I imagine I will have to stand the company of those two wretched mages on our trip to Touran.” Hyoushin said levelly. “Two of my best and most loyal men are stationed behind enemy lines. Consequently, Kayu, there is no question about whether or not you should join us. You cannot be spared — I will have need of your skills.”

He spread his hands, the faintest flicker of a smile in his amethyst eyes.

“In Aoiketsu’s absence, I will also rely somewhat on your literacy.” He admitted. “Him aside, you have the best education of any of my men. And it may well be that I have need of it.”

“Then I’ll do as you say.” Kayu said firmly. “I’ll be ready at dawn to leave for Hokkan.”

“Good man.” Kintsusei nodded approvingly. “Then you are dismissed. Take what rest you can — the travel tomorrow will doubtless be harsh.”

“Thank you, sire.” Kayu bowed his head once more towards his Emperor. “I’ll do so.”

With that he withdrew from the chamber, saluting the guards on duty once more as he left his King and the Meihi Commander to his own devices. As he walked slowly along the hallways, he reflected on the meeting, finding that some kind of burden had been lifted from his young heart by divulging Aoiketsu’s message.

“Perhaps I have been overreacting about Toroki.” He murmured, as he acknowledged a couple of junior soldiers busy practicing with wooden sticks on the ground outside the military barracks. “Maichu’s so sure that she’s cooperating with the South and Aoi didn’t seem to think that what she said meant anything at all. We know that she really is an ally of theirs, so what Maichu says is probably right. Being back here — maybe I am paranoid.”

He reached the main entrance, leaning up against the wall as he considered.

“Hyoushin-sama seemed as much as ever, and I certainly didn’t get the impression he was either worried or hiding anything sinister.” He admitted to himself. “He and the Emperor both have trust in me, and if Hyoushin-sama was plotting something, why would he want me to come along so specifically? Also, why would he want Maichu to rejoin our party as soon as possible? I know that he, Aoi and I are probably the best men he has at the moment, and all of us would die for our Emperor as soon as breathe. If that’s the case... Hyoushin-sama must be acting with the Emperor’s best interests at heart. Surely? Otherwise he’d want us as far away from here as possible.”

He sighed.

“Kayu, you’re letting yourself get spooked by a woman’s random babblings.” He told himself ruefully. “You should leave the girls to Maichu and focus on your duty. You’ve finally gained the trust of the Emperor and your Commander... all the hard work has paid off. And in Aoiketsu’s absence, I might yet prove myself even more invaluable to my King and country. I should be careful — and grateful that neither Maichu nor Aoi are likely to mention my suspicions to anyone else. I’ve just been involved in this spying a little too much — I need to reassess my priorities.”

“Kayu-nii! Kayu-nii!”

At that moment he was jerked out of his reverie by the voice of a young boy and he started, turning to see one of the junior soldiers eying him expectantly. Something in the eager, tousled demeanour of

this fourteen year old boy reminded Kayu of his own childhood striving to be the best soldier he could be, and he smiled, sending the boy a curious look as he did so.

“What’s the matter?” He asked. “If you want to fight, I’m tired and I’m not fighting anyone today.”

“No, it’s not that.” The boy shook his head. “I’ve come from the palace, on an errand from Lord Kikei!”

“Kikei-sama?” Kayu looked startled, and the boy nodded.

“He heard that you’d returned and he asked me to come tell you that he wants to see you as soon as possible.” He agreed excitedly. “He was going to give me a written note, but I told him I could remember and that I knew who you were. So I came straight away... he’s in his quarters, and he wants to see you now.”

“Then I’ll go at once.” Kayu said decidedly. “Thank you for passing on the message.”

“It’s all right. It’s more interesting than cleaning the yard.” The boy grimaced. “Kayu-nii, is Aoi-nii not coming back to Kutou? I thought he was with you, but he and Maichu-nii aren’t here and I wanted to see how much stronger I’d gotten. Aoi-nii always fights with us — I wanted to see if I could disarm him yet.”

“Aoi and Maichu are still on Imperial business.” Kayu patted the boy on the head. “Which if you work hard, will one day be your job too, no doubt. Keep practicing — Aoi will be back here soon enough.”

“And you, Kayu-nii? Later, when you’re rested — will *you* fight with me?” The boy begged. “It’s not like fighting Aoi-nii, but it’s better than nothing.”

Kayu smiled ruefully at the tactless honesty of the boy’s request, shaking his head.

“I’m far too busy.” He responded. “Tomorrow I will be leaving again, and I haven’t much time to do anything.”

“The Commander too, huh?” The boy looked dejected, and Kayu nodded.

“But how are we supposed to get strong and fight enemies when noone’s here to train us?” The boy asked. Kayu smiled.

“The point of our going is to try and make sure that there’s no need to fight.” He said evenly. “Except in tournaments and for individual honour. War is a grisly, messy business, you know. It’s not all glory

and victory.”

“I suppose.” The boy frowned. “But Maru-nii and his regiment were killed in the south, and I... I wanted to be strong enough to go help.”

“Maru-nii?” Kayu paled, staring at the boy in disbelief. “But... *Koku Maru*? The Southern captain... was killed?”

“Yes.” The boy looked surprised. “There was a battle in the Southern province and he and a lot of other men were killed. The Emperor had to send reinforcements and they beat the rebels and executed the leaders. But Maru-nii was one of the ones who died.”

Kayu’s face became grave, and he nodded his head.

“I see.” He murmured. “Then what we’re doing becomes even more important. *Koku Maru* was one of the most talented young captains still loyal to the Emperor in any of the provinces away from the capital city. I don’t know who’ll replace him — but it makes me realise how much more important what we’re doing is than I thought.”

“Maybe *you’ll* be a captain, Kayu-nii. When you’ve finished with the Emperor’s business.” The boy suggested. Kayu bit his lip, then he shrugged.

“Perhaps.” He agreed. “If Kintsusei-sama wanted me to be, I’d accept the honour. But right now I have other things pressing on me. I mustn’t keep Kikei-sama waiting — and if you have errands to run, I’d run them before you get into trouble. After all, the Commander will be leaving Kutou in the morning — but he’ll still notice anything left undone tonight.”

“I suppose so.” The boy agreed. “All right. I’ll go back to cleaning.”

He saluted Kayu clumsily, and Kayu returned the gesture, then turned on his heel, hurrying back across the grounds towards the corner of the palace where the Priest made his base. As he did so, he inwardly berated himself for having not gone there sooner.

“I reported to the Emperor and Hyoushin-sama but not to my own patron.” He muttered. “What will he think, if he hears that? I’ve forgotten my manners in all of this. Dammit, but even so... in the circumstances nothing is as it normally is. Maru was one of us — he was the soldier we all aspired to be when we were young. Even before I was transferred into the military corps when I was thirteen I knew who *Koku Maru* was and that everyone had high hopes of him. Now he’s dead... I wonder what the Emperor will do. He didn’t mention it, when I made my report. Maybe he’s already appointed a captain, or

perhaps he's just putting all his faith in our mission. But whatever it is, the South has always been a rocky area to control. So close to Kounan's border, and with breakaway communities like Seisen-mura in-between... this is worrying for Kutou indeed."

"You're in a hurry, Kayu-kun."

At the sound of the Priest's voice, Kayu stopped dead, turning to face his patron with a guilty expression on his face. Belatedly he remembered his bow, and at his awkward, jerked movement, Kikei laughed, reaching out to rest his hand on the young soldier's arm.

"This isn't a Kayu I'm used to seeing." He reflected. "What has you so agitated, my boy? You've been deployed in the South — is it such a terrible land as that?"

"No, Kikei-sama. Actually, Kounan is peaceful." Kayu shook his head, his cheeks red as he met his patron's inquisitive beady gaze. "I'm sorry. One of the boys just told me about Koku Maru and what happened. I suppose my mind was on that — and the implications for the Emperor."

"Such things aren't your concern at the present time, although your thoughts do you credit." Kikei shook his head slightly, leading his companion into his own quarters and indicating for him to take a seat. "I had heard you'd arrived back — I assume you've spoken to the Emperor?"

"Yes, sir."

"And made report to him about your mission?"

"Yes, sir."

"It goes well, I trust?"

"I hope so." Kayu admitted. "I returned to deliver a message by hand to Kintsusei-sama, and I've done so. But Hyoushin-sama doesn't intend me to return to Kounan, it seems. I'm to go North with them into Hokkan tomorrow morning instead."

"I'm not surprised." Kikei heaved his bulk into an empty seat, folding his wizened hands in his lap as he gazed at his protegee thoughtfully. 'You're a strong and capable young fighter these days, Kayu-kun. And it pleases me that you've proven my faith in you right. You know that among all the children I helped after the war, you've always had the most potential. I hoped that you'd be a lynchpin in Kutou's push for peace — that's why I gave you the family name I did when I first took charge of you. "Hei' means" peace " , after all."

He smiled.

“Now you’re in the Emperor’s sight and that can only be to your benefit. We’ve often discussed the idea of you taking the exams to become an official — have you still thoughts in that direction? Because now your position to do so is as good as its ever been.”

“Kikei-sama?” Kayu looked startled. “I haven’t thought about it a lot recently, to be honest. This all has more been pressing on my mind. And now Aoi and Maichu — I’ve left them behind in enemy territory, so that’s on my mind, too.”

“Really.” Kikei looked thoughtful. “I was under the impression that you weren’t always so keen on the young Kaiga boy.”

“That was a long time ago.” Kayu flushed red a second time. “When we *were* just boys. And it was only us being silly adolescents.”

“I remember a young man of fourteen swearing to me that one day he’d knock the blade out of Kaiga Aoiketsu’s hands.” Kikei ruminated. “That he wouldn’t be beaten by a boy of eleven so easily. Have you, then, learnt to put those feelings aside in the pursuit of Kutou’s common good?”

Kayu frowned.

“As I said, it was a long time ago.” He said quietly. “Aoi and I are friends. And in many ways, I’m a better soldier than he’ll ever be. His reaction to blood will always hold him back, no matter how much he trains. I don’t have that drawback. Maichu is far more competition for me these days than Kaiga Aoiketsu. But like I said, we’re friends. And Maichu and I have almost always been that. I don’t think there’s any kind of rivalry like that now, Kikei-sama. Not really. And I don’t understand why you’d mention it now.”

“There’s no real reason behind it.” Kikei sat back in his seat, a thoughtful glitter in his eyes. “I just thought that, with Aoiketsu so deployed as a spy in the South, you have the perfect opportunity to shine.”

“I intended to do that anyway.” Kayu assured him, and Kikei chuckled.

“Yes, I thought you might feel that way.” He agreed. “And I’m happy to hear it. You do make this old man proud with your achievements, Kayu. I’m sure that it means a great future lies ahead of you.”

“If Kutou has peace, maybe.” Kayu looked sober, and Kikei inclined

his head, a serious look entering his own gaze.

“Yes. This recent rebellion is troubling. I’m sorry for the death of Koku Maru and his companions, Kayu. And for you, because you trained with them. It’s a bad loss for the Emperor, too.”

“It is.” Kayu glanced at his hands. “Maybe if we’d been here, we could have...”

“The errand you are on is far more significant than anything in the provinces.” Kikei shook his head. “Kayu-kun, you’ve taken great risks already for your Emperor in Kounan. Are you so eager to meet an enemy’s blade?”

“No, but if there’s something we could do...”

“What you do is already enough.” Kikei assured him. “And to that end, I’d appreciate it if you’d make report to me also. If, that is, the Emperor has not made you promise otherwise.”

“No, he hasn’t.” Kayu shook his head. “In fact, I think there are things in Aoiketsu’s letter which he’s going to ask you about. About the girl, Hikari, and her relationship to the Suzaku warrior Tamahome. Apparently Tamahome still lives — but Aoi doesn’t understand where he is or why he’s not involved in things. Hyoushin-sama thinks that the girl might have inherited some kind of stellar ability from him, though — do you think that’s possible?”

“This girl that Hyoushin has suddenly become interested in...” Kikei pursed his lips, considering. “I have never heard of such a thing, Kayu. But then, there are few children of Seishi in existence. Certainly in this land there are none... and Seiryuu is the God with whom I am mostly affiliated. I suppose it is possible — but even so, it would be a dilute form. Tamahome was a fearsome warrior indeed — but even if he does have a daughter, and even if she does have some stellar ability, it would be diluted by the blood of her mother. If that’s all we have to deal with — this is something of a relief. We already possess Shinzahou and the power of two risen mages. A girl with a faint trace of Suzaku’s magic cannot be a threat to our plans.”

“She seemed like a very ordinary kind of girl to me.” Kayu agreed. “Not especially striking in any way. And Aoi has more or less said the same.”

“Then this is good news.” Kikei pursed his lips. “And of other matters? What of the Byakko Seishi, Toroki? The half-blood of Tamahome’s descendant is nothing compared to the reincarnated spirit of a true warrior — has she truly aligned herself with the men of

the South?"

"Yes." Kayu's expression became shadowed as he remembered once more the prophesy. "She's a really odd dame, Kikei-sama. If I never meet her again, it'll be too soon. She said such strange things... Maichu is convinced that it's because she's in Kounan's pay, and that everything she said was rubbish. But she had such a strange look in her eye... I guess I don't know for sure."

"I see." Kikei's eyes narrowed to near slits. "This woman made a prophesy in your presence, did she?"

Kayu shrugged his shoulders.

"If you can call it that. Even she didn't seem to understand what it meant." He admitted. "I was with Hyoushin-sama when we retrieved the Shinzahou from her. She acted so strangely... I think she's possibly insane, to be honest."

"And yet she's unsettled you, my boy?"

"I think it's just the way she looked at me." Kayu said pensively. "Not so much anything else. It was like she looked right through me... it chilled me to the bone. Even though Maichu's explanation is the most logical one... I suppose it's bothering me."

"What has your noble Commander had to say about it?"

"Not much. We're not meant to discuss it." Kayu bit his lip guiltily. "But you're my patron, and I trust you, Kikei-sama. It won't matter if you know."

"Hyoushin seeks to conceal it... has he reported it to the Emperor?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Then I would like to hear it. If just to try and set your mind at rest." Kikei said softly. Kayu frowned, then he nodded.

"She spoke of... of someone of tribal blood betraying our King." He murmured. "And that... one of us... one of the three of us, I suppose... would be struck down by someone we considered a brother or a friend. Then she looked right at me, and said my name... and... and 'Byakko preserve my soul', or something like that. And to Maichu... I'm not sure. She seemed surprised that Maichu was there. That we were all there, together. As if we shouldn't have been, somehow."

"Someone of tribal blood." Kikei's brows knitted together, and Kayu saw a flicker of anxiety flare in the Priest's dark eyes. "This is worrying indeed. I wonder what the Emperor does know of it."

He glanced up at his companion.

“What are your thoughts, Kayu-kun? What do you think this means?”

“I don’t know.” Kayu looked guilty. “For a while I thought... maybe the tribal man... was the Commander. That that was why he sent the three of us South, away from the Emperor. And... and it’s a terrible thing to think about your Commander, I know... but that... maybe he... had something else planned. Something we didn’t know about. But Maichu... he’s convinced it was just Toroki trying to spook us. And I’m confused.”

Kikei was silent for a moment. Then he nodded.

“Do you believe Hyoushin capable of such an act?” He asked gently. Kayu started, then shook his head.

“That’s where I’m having trouble.” He confessed. “I... I respect the Commander, and I can’t imagine him betraying Kintsusei-sama. The trouble is, though, I don’t ever really know what he’s thinking. Even Maichu seems to know better than me what’s going through his mind... and Maichu can be a blockhead sometimes when it comes to people. So even if he was... I wouldn’t know.”

He sighed.

“Hyoushin-sama is Kintsusei-heika’s most trusted man, so I’m more or less committing treason even suggesting this.” He added. “Even just to you, in the privacy of your quarters. I’m sorry, Kikei-sama. I don’t mean to.”

“No...” Kikei’s expression became thoughtful. “I don’t think you have anything to apologise for, Kayu. Your fears are just ones in light of Toroki’s words. I know a little of the woman from Miramu’s own accounts and stories. And I believe her visions — such as they are — are generally proven accurate. Even if at the present time those indications are vague, it seems like she’s given you a warning — of something in Kutou’s future that may yet upset the attempt to bring it peace.”

“You think there may be more to it?” Kayu looked startled, and Kikei frowned.

“Hyoushin has always stood apart from Seiryuu and the God’s works.” He mused. “From the moment the Emperor brought him into the palace as a heathen, roughly trained soldier, he has never attended the shrine except on Imperial business. He does not respect the God in whose name we all act. The only reason he’s got away with that for so

long is because Kintsusei-sama is inexplicably fond of him. It's true he's a fine soldier and a fierce commander... but as you rightly observe, his motives are easily concealed. In light of Toroki's prophesy, I don't believe we can be too careful. Working for the enemy she might be, but if she's given us some clue to dissension in our ranks, it would be wise not to ignore it."

Kayu looked uncomfortable.

"He said he trusted me. That I couldn't be spared." He admitted. "He's... at last he's taken me seriously as a soldier. Kikei-sama — do you really think he could...?"

"Let me tell you something that few of you soldiers know." Kikei said quietly. "About your Commander and his past."

"About the... Commander?"

"You know, I think, that he was recruited by the Shougun into the Imperial army on Kintsusei-sama's request? That he was the only slave to survive a raid on the Kaiga estate, and as such, was freed from his bonds?"

"Yes. But..."

"Do you know why it was that Nakago showed a particular interest in him, Kayu-kun?"

"No." Kayu shook his head.

"A man with no training, born of a tribe reputed to be peaceful and unassuming." Kikei's eyes became cold. "This ghost from the northern lands who so suddenly made the transition from heathen to fighter in an alarmingly short space of time. Do you understand why it is that Kintsusei-sama gave him the name *Hyoushin*? It's because the first time he ever held a sword, he used it to slice off an enemy's head. And it wasn't hot anger or the passion of a soldier that burned in his heart, but cold, frozen rage. I have seen this in his gaze only on a couple of occasions... this icy hatred towards his opponent, this complete lack of mercy or hesitation. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Kayu bit his lip.

"Hyoushin-sama has executed traitors on the Emperor's behalf with that sword-arm." He murmured. "And... fought in battle. He's impossible to disarm... we've all tried and even Aoiketsu can't knock the blade from his fist. But..."

"Hyoushin was a slave." Kikei said evenly. "Any soul he may have once had has been beaten out of him, and only that cold, icy hatred

remains. He has no other emotions left. He is truly as the Emperor named him — *'Ice Heart'*. The man who enslaved and beat him was a close ally of Kintsusei-sama's father, Shoukitei. And although the son is not in the mould of the father... the Meihi were slaughtered under Imperial order. Slaughtered, imprisoned, sold as slaves. Hyoushin's people, Kayu. Hundreds of them. Yet this ghost claims to be the Emperor's most loyal servant. Do you see a problem with this picture?"

"You think that Hyoushin-sama is biding his time for some kind of revenge?" Kayu whispered, his eyes wide. Kikei shrugged.

"No. Not necessarily. I wouldn't make such a claim without proof." He said levelly. "But suspicions — yes, I have those. And your words... concern me. After all, my boy, who else do you know born of a tribe that surrounds the Emperor closely enough to betray him?"

"I... don't." Kayu admitted. "Hyoushin-sama is... the only one."

"You said you're leaving with them tomorrow for Hokkan?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then in that case, I have an errand for you also." Kikei decided. "In the Emperor's name — in his interests, we must discover any plot afoot before it can move any further. If Hyoushin is innocent, we must clear his name and look elsewhere. If he is guilty, he must be stopped before it threatens Kintsusei-sama's life. Do you understand? I want you to keep an eye on your Commander and report directly back to me if you find anything amiss."

"That won't be easy to do." Kayu murmured, and Kikei shook his head.

"No, but if you have gained the man's trust, I believe you will be able to manage." He responded. "Tomorrow, before you depart, come to see me. I'll fashion you with a charmed mirror much like the one Hyoushin himself carries with which to communicate with the Emperor. And then you can reach me whenever you need. This may be a matter of life and death — Kayu, can I rely on you?"

Kayu hesitated for a moment. Then he got to his feet, bowing his head towards his mentor.

"For the Emperor, I'll do what it takes." He said softly. "I understand, Kikei-sama."

"Good." Kikei's expression became one of approval. "Then go, my boy, and rest. You have much to do when the morrow comes. And

take care in Hokkan — it is a treacherous path and I will worry for your safe return.”

“Thank you, Kikei-sama.” Kayu smiled. “I’ll do my best. I’m not the kind of soldier who’s easily killed.”

He bowed again, then withdrew from the chamber, pausing outside the door.

“Kikei-sama.” He murmured. “Are you right? I thought it was paranoia, but all those things...”

He sighed, rubbing his temples.

“I’ve heard whispers and rumours about Hyoushin-sama’s past and his ability.” He admitted to himself. “But we never... he never talks of it. Of any of it. Nothing about his life as a slave, or his meeting with Kintsusei-sama. Just that the Emperor freed him. Could Kikei-sama’s fears be right? Is Toroki really giving us a glimpse into his treachery?”

He closed his eyes briefly.

“Well, Aoi, it looks like you aren’t the only one spying for your Emperor.” He realised. “Seiryuu protect me, but this is something I must do. If my Commander is innocent, I will prove it so. But if not... I will do what it takes to defend Kintsusei-sama from treason, no matter what the cost!”

“What games are you playing, Priest?”

As Kikei settled himself back in his seat, Miramu dropped down onto the floor beside him, making his aging companion jump with surprise. The assassin laughed, amusement glittering in his indigo eyes as he settled cross-legged on the floor before the priest, eying him expectantly.

“A guilty conscience putting you on edge?” He suggested innocently, and Kikei frowned, shaking his head.

“You should tell me when you’re hiding in my quarters, Miramu. It’s not good etiquette to sneak up on a Priest of the Shrine like that without being properly announced.” He responded, gathering his wits as he sent the westerner a reproachful look. Miramu shrugged his shoulders, no repentance in his gaze.

“I’m a shadow. I learn things that way.” He said easily, brushing his finger against the red character ‘*kage*’ that marked leather collar at his neck. “You read Chinese, Kikei-sama. You should know that this

signifies that and that I will always be around wherever there is information to be unearthed.”

“You are not paid to spy on me, Miramu.”

“I am doing no such thing.” Miramu made himself more comfortable, raising his gaze to the older man’s. “I have no reason to — you’re the one whose coffers my payment comes from. Even if it’s the Emperor’s will, you are the one who passes the gold into my hands. And that means of all the people in Kutou, Kikei-sama — you have a better claim to my loyalty than even your King.”

“Then why are you here?” Kikei asked. “Why not announce yourself sooner?”

“I didn’t want to make your boy suspicious.” Miramu toyed idly with his dagger, pursing his lips as he considered. “Kayu is a smart soldier but somewhat easy to put on edge. Besides, I was curious to know what exactly Toroki said to them when they gathered the Shinzahou. None of them spoke of it afterwards — now I know why. I did think Kayu was uneasy... but then he seems that way naturally. There’s no challenge in trying to frighten men like him.”

“You speak complete nonsense sometimes.” Kikei sighed, rubbing his temples. “All right. So explain to me your presence here now. Just to antagonise me, or something more?”

“Initially just out of interest, when I saw Kayu come here.” Miramu admitted, re-sheathing his dagger as he folded his arms across his chest. “But the subject of conversation became interesting to me.”

“In what respect?”

“Hyoushin, naturally.” Miramu’s lips twitched into a derisive smile. “The Meihi ghost who stalks these halls like a tortured war spirit.”

“I see.” Kikei became thoughtful. “And what was said interested you?”

“I know nothing of his past, because noone ever speaks of it — him least of all.” Miramu reflected evenly. “I only hear the rumours that are whispered — of the man with the legendary left arm that decapitates with one swing. But even so I don’t believe he’s a traitor to Kintsusei-heika. I don’t think he has the imagination or the soul to rebel against his King. He’s a slave, Kikei-sama. He’s nothing else... no matter what pretences of freedom are made, he’s been trained to obey orders and that’s all he knows how to do.”

“Yes... probably that’s so.” Kikei admitted, and Miramu’s eyes

glittered with interest.

“Ah. So it’s as I thought.” He murmured. “You *do* wish to get rid of the Emperor’s shadow.”

Kikei stared at him for a moment. Then he smiled.

“It would be no loss to me if he were no longer a player.” He admitted. “To be truthful, though, I don’t seek to eradicate him as such. He’s not important enough to me to be a true rival... or an obstacle in my path. But Toroki’s vision is worrying, don’t you think so? This idea of a man of a tribe betraying the Emperor — surely there can be no other explanation but that? I act in my Emperor’s interests, and that is all. You are too suspicious, Miramu.”

“I’m sure.” Miramu chuckled. “And yet you asked the boy so blatantly if he could think of any other explanation. Almost as if you wanted to know something else from him.”

“Such as?”

“Whether or not he’s aware of your *own* roots, Lord Kikei.” Miramu said softly. Kikei started, and Miramu’s smile widened.

“I’m a shadow, but even shadows have ears.” He murmured. “Don’t worry. I have no intention of telling anyone — least of all the ghost. But your deflection of suspicion onto Hyoushin is to cover your own back — I’m sure of that. Which is why I’m so interested. I get the feeling that you’re involved in more than just simply guiding the Emperor’s quest.”

“As I said, you speak nonsense a lot of the time, Miramu.”

“And yet in that nonsense is both truth and sense.” Miramu reflected. “Kikei-sama, I’ll be plain with you. If you commit treason on your Emperor, I won’t bat an eyelid or try to stop you. I’m from Sairou. Kutou’s politics don’t concern me in the slightest. But you can’t hide things from me. Your Emperor knows of your Hin background, therefore so do I. Because I watch, listen and wait for useful tidbits of information. It doesn’t concern me in any way at all. But I’d like to know whose side I’m fighting for. Because it might require an increase in my fee.”

“You play with fire.”

“So do you.” Miramu said easily. “I’ve killed many, but noone has ever got close enough to me to truly wound me. Certainly not a fat old priest. So share with me your secrets, Kikei-sama. Tell me what you really want me to do.”

Kikei was silent for a moment. Then he smiled, shaking his head.

“I am not looking to betray Kintsusei-sama.” He said quietly. “Even if my roots are as you say, I have one concern. Kutou’s future... and Kutou’s stability. That is all. Whatever ends are necessary to achieve that I will follow. Nothing more.”

“You are a good liar, but I don’t believe you.” Miramu said frankly. “Because I know something else, too, Kikei-sama. I’ve heard stories and rumours and legends about the Hin — about the great Shougun Nakago, and his legacy to Kutou. But I’ve also heard other things on my travels. About a man who sold his people out... whose true Hin nature was known to Shoukitei even though he claims it was not. That Shoukitei used that man to smoke out and slaughter the Hin, and managed to preserve his own wretched life in return for his information.”

His gaze became piercing, as he eyed the Priest carefully.

“That man was you.” He murmured. “Your conversion to Seiryuu saved your life as it did Nakago’s, but you have no true interest in the dragon that you serve. You are as cold to the beast God’s faith as I am to Byakko’s in the West. What you seek is your own security and power. If the Emperor provides it, you are loyal to him. If he does not, you will betray him. That is the man I see, Kikei-sama. The true nature of the Priest of Seiryuu’s Shrine.”

Kikei pursed his lips. Then he laughed.

“You are an astute shadow, Miramu.” He acknowledged. “There is some truth in your statement, and some falsehood, also. The past is not important — no one left alive remembers the events that led to the Hin’s massacre and I prefer the story that the Emperor believes — that I narrowly escaped the persecution with my life. I was never much of a Hin, in truth. I was always too much of a pragmatist. I did not care when they were killed... the only one in whom I had any interest at all was the boy Seishi — the one who grew up to be Nakago. And even he did not know that I was something other than a survivor protected by Seiryuu’s banner. The Hin were a dark, desperate tribe who put faith in the demon Tenkou. Tenkou was almost the cause of all destruction in this world. Do you really think me such a bad man, when you consider that fact?”

“I already told you that I don’t care.” Miramu shrugged. “Your explanations are pointless to someone who has no interest in Kutou’s politics or history. I’m more interested in now. And whether you want me to kill Hyoushin or not. His death would, after all, remove him

from your line of sight.”

“You seem keen to kill Hyoushin.” Kikei reflected. “Do you have your own reasons for wanting him dead, Miramu?”

“Hyoushin’s soul is already dead. His body should join it.” Miramu said acidly. “It’s not nice to see walking emptiness stalking around the palace. Besides, he seems to think I’m not able to kill him. I like challenges... I’d like to prove him wrong.”

“No...” Kikei held up his hand, slowly shaking his head. “No. The Emperor has great faith in Hyoushin and we must, too. At least, we must not be hasty. Hyoushin’s presence is an irritation, but the itch can easily be scratched another way.”

“Kayu.” Miramu murmured, and Kikei nodded.

“Kayu owes me everything.” He agreed. “And in my own way. I’m fond of him, also. But he has ultimate trust and faith in my word and at long last he’s in a position of importance. Of all my protégées, I’ve always had the most hope in him. Now it is being repaid.”

“If Kayu finds Hyoushin’s behaviour suspicious.”

“Kayu is overly diligent. He’ll look for it, even if he doesn’t realise he’s doing so.” Kikei responded. “And the soldiers who travel with him are more easily persuadable than the likes of Kaiga Aoiketsu and Shi Maichu, whose deployment in the South have proven a convenient coincidence for me. In their absence, more can be accomplished. With evidence to present to the Emperor, Hyoushin can be more than just killed, Miramu. He can be overthrown and exiled. And then...”

“Then he’s mine.” Miramu whispered. Kikei chuckled.

“You truly do bear him hate, don’t you?” He observed lightly, and Miramu shrugged.

“It would be a pleasure to kill him.” He admitted. “To see him discredited before death would be an added bonus. He’s crossed me, Kikei-sama, and I don’t like people who do that. So all right. I’ll play by your rules. So long as, if you succeed in removing him from power — the final blow is mine to cast.”

“To paint Hyoushin as a traitor will render him devoid of the Emperor’s protection.” Kikei responded. “Although he is beloved by his soldiers, the ministers of Kutou’s court do not hold him in such high esteem. To gain a vote to impeach his position would not be difficult... and might even be possible without his Highness being present. In the political situation that Kutou is in, it might be so. Once

that is done, he will be no longer my — or Kutou's — concern. And if you wished to kill him — well, that would be his own bad luck. There is no treason in assassinating a traitor to the throne, after all."

"You are a crafty old fox, you know." Miramu told him, and Kikei nodded.

"That's why I live when other Hin died." He said pragmatically. "By seeing the possibilities and exploiting them. If Toroki is making predictions about tribal men, then Hyoushin will be the scapegoat. He's usefully positioned after all. It's just a matter of waiting, that's all. Everything in good time. After all, it's in the Emperor's interests if we protect him from traitors — is it not?"

"I won't even answer that." Miramu returned, amused. "But I'll follow your way for the time being. I can wait to kill the Meihi. Your method sounds more interesting. If you really believe your boy can generate proof..."

"Kayu will find something. I told you. It's his way to be diligent and thorough." Kikei replied. "And with the southern rebellion fresh in his mind too, he has many things concerning him."

"A rebellion, my Lord Priest, which I suspect was not coincidentally timed?" Miramu asked innocently. "I heard that the enemy went straight for the southern captain Koku Maru and certain of his other significant men at arms. Men loyal to the Emperor... should I be joining these dots in your direction, too?"

"Perhaps, perhaps not." Kikei said evenly. "Koku Maru was, indeed, a fine soldier. And loyal to death for his King. But the Southern border is an uneasy place at the best of times. The connections to Kounan are never quite defined and since Seisen-mura broke away it's not been entirely clear where the divide lies. There have been many skirmishes. Captain Koku was unfortunate. That's all."

"Unfortunate and loyal to the Emperor." Miramu murmured. Kikei nodded.

"Indeed." He agreed.

He got to his feet, moving across to the window as he glanced out across the palace complex.

"Kayu is not the only war orphan I supported and educated when Nakago was slain." He added. "I told you — I see opportunities and have the wisdom to take them. Kayu is my most promising charge — his quick brain and his natural sword ability made it imperative to slip him into the Imperial gaze. And so I have. To fill the court with my

own men around an inexperienced, easily malleable boy-king— this was originally my plan when first I helped bring Kintsusei-sama to the throne. However... to keep the level of power I have now, and to be more than just a being cloaked inside a shrine, Kutou's situation had to remain unstable. Not ideal, but unavoidable. By planning ahead, I have succeeded in bringing the Emperor to this point — to the level where he's willing to put his resources towards gathering Shinzahou. And by doing so, gain the greatest power of all."

"You want to take on *Seiryuu's* power, don't you?" Miramu said astutely. "These boys you adopted are now men, and their gratitude to you is their loyalty. People you've slipped into high-risk areas to do your bidding — in this case, they fuel the ongoing dissention and keep the civil war alive. In this way — much as you deploy me — you've been able to slay rivals and competitors under the guise of war and keep a firm grip on your position as a significant Imperial advisor."

"As a Hin, I can do little more." Kikei admitted. "I was debarred by Shoukitei's laws from taking the exams to become a true court official. And even though Kintsusei-sama seeks to repeal most of those laws — in my case, it is now too late. I will never be able to effect any political influence that way. So this... is my only course of action."

"And your minions trot faithfully to heel." Miramu snorted derisively. "Don't imagine me to be one of them, Kikei-sama."

"I wouldn't insult you with that assumption." Kikei turned, meeting the assassin's gaze. "You are my most precious weapon — secret, silent death. I value your services a good deal — and your ongoing cooperation. You should not think otherwise."

"Now I know a good deal about you, Lord Priest — I hope you won't think to discharge your demons in my direction." Miramu shook his head. "If you do, they will all be brought down."

"I'm not foolish." Kikei responded evenly. "I wouldn't try and kill a professional assassin. But it works both ways. My political position affords you both work and protection from justice in not only this land but in others, too. Was that not my promise to you, when we forged our alliance initially? That so long as you worked for me, there would be no question of you being brought to trial for any crimes you may have committed?"

"Indeed." Miramu said softly. "So long as you understand I am not someone you can easily manipulate. I'll work with you, because your ends suit mine. And mine suit yours — so we are well matched. I can keep your secrets, Lord Priest, since you have always kept your word

to me so far.”

“Then for the time being there’s not much for either one to do except await Kayu’s report.” Kikei said evenly. “You won’t travel with Hyoushin this time, but try not to trouble him or make him suspicious in the time he’s still in Kutou. From his words to me, he already doubts your motives.”

“Yes, he does.” Miramu agreed. “Because I don’t easily respond to his orders as much as he’d like me to. Plus he seems inordinately bothered by the death of that Kounan boy, too. But he pays me nothing, so I’ve no reason to listen to him. You needn’t worry about my motives, Kikei-sama. They are, almost entirely, financial.”

“And the ones that are not?”

“Are not of Kutou’s concern.” Miramu admitted. “I wish to keep as far from Byakko and Sairou as possible, because the Byakko Seishi Toroki believes she will one day cause my death. Is there any more that needs to be said on the subject? You know that’s why I shelter in the East.”

“Indeed.” Kikei inclined his head. “All right then. We will let Hyoushin take his men North and wait for Kayu to speak to me. But now, Miramu, I’d like to be left alone. I have to hex a mirror for the boy to take with him, and such spells require all of my concentration.”

“For a priest, you have such a weak command of divine magic.” Miramu taunted, and Kikei snorted.

“I rose Suiko from her sleep, even without the blood of a Seishi. I am not so feeble as you think.” He replied. Miramu laughed.

“True enough, but that woman is an embarrassment to Kutou, so I would not take much pride in it.” He replied. “All right. I’ll leave you to your casting. I’m sure I have other things I could be doing also. There is, after all, *always* information to be gathered within such a place as a royal palace.”

“Well, I guess we’re ready to get going.”

Shishi cast a glance across at the tethered horses that stood waiting patiently beneath the trees at the edge of the Eastern village, nodding her head in approval as her gaze fell on the supplies fastened neatly in packs behind the saddles of each. “Nothing more to do, nothing more to get. We’re just standin’ around in the sun when we should be movin’ off.”

“You’re eager, considering you’ve been to Hokkan before.” Hikari grimaced, sending her friend a rueful look. “Snow and ice, remember? If I had a choice in it, I think I’d stay in Kounan. But as it is...”

“As it is, you stop moanin’ now — I know what’s comin’ next and there’s no way around it.” Shishi shook her head. “You’re gettin’ on a horse, Hiki, an’ there’s no Jin to look after you this time. You’re just goin’ to have to lump it — there ain’t no way around it. We don’t have the time to walk an’ you said yourself that your powers ain’t strong enough to take us anywhere.”

“I can’t ride, Shishi. They terrify me.” Hikari responded, eying the beasts with dislike. “I don’t ride in my world. I told you that before. I’ll just fall off — without Jin, I’d have fallen off the last time.”

“Well, you can ride with me if you like, but I ain’t goin’ to promise it’ll be a comfortable ride if you do.” Shishi said simply. “Horses ain’t designed for piggy-back ridin’. But it’s not so hard... if you sit up right, an’ hold on, you won’t fall off.”

“Easy for you to say when you’ve been riding since you were small.” Hikari sighed, leaning up against the stone wall of Chichiri’s farmstead with a shake of her head. “It doesn’t matter how you say it. I’m never going to get anywhere on one of those.”

“Hiki.” Shishi sighed. “Oh, I give up. You’re hopeless. Didn’t you hear me? We don’t have time for walking! We’ve got a longer journey to get to Hokkan than Kutou would — we can’t risk hanging around any longer than we already have. Remember, we don’t know where this thing even is. It’s going to take us a while to pinpoint it!”

“At least I’m here.” Hikari pointed out. “Which is more than can be said for Myoume or Aoi.”

“I’m here.” Myoume dropped down from the branches of the tree, startling not only the horses but her travel companions as she dusted herself down. “I was just scouring the area for Miramu’s chi — but he’s not here. It should be safe for us to travel out.”

“You really do need to stop climbing trees.” Shishi said frankly. “Myoume, you might be Byakko’s but you ain’t a friggin’ cat.”

“I haven’t seen trees much for four years.” Myoume shrugged. ‘And when I was small, Miramu and I used to climb them all the time. You’ve been to my village — you must know that the name of it is Shouki — “Living tree.’ Or didn’t you notice the cluster of woodland around the southern edge? We used to play there all the time — its second nature and there’s nowhere better than up a tree when trying

to scour for a particular sensation.”

A wistful look touched her face.

“I used to cheat at hide and seek that way all the time.” She admitted. “It used to drive him crazy, that no matter what he did he couldn’t hide from me.”

“Well, at least he’s not in Kounan.” Hikari murmured. “I hope we don’t ever see him again. We can’t undo what he’s done, after all. I don’t want him to do anything else to anyone.”

“Me either, which is why I’m keeping such a close eye on things.” Myoume cast her a smile. “And here comes our final travel companion, so we really can set out.”

“Aoi, where the hell have you been?” As the young Kutou soldier slipped out of the Ri farmstead grounds, Shishi cast him a dark look, shaking her head in frustration. “Let me guess — you were doing your hair, or something just as useless!? Geez — we haven’t even set out yet and you’re already driving me crazy.”

“Actually, I was collecting the map from Chichiri-san.” Aoiketsu said mildly, holding up the parchment as proof of his story. “He wanted to be absolutely sure I was clear on it. Whether you have faith in me or not, Shishi, your uncle seems to have charged me with the navigation of this mission. It’s a role of considerable responsibility so naturally I do not want to let him down.”

“Naturally.” Shishi groaned. “All right. Well, we’re all here already. Can we go now? It’s going to take us forever to get Hikari on a damn horse — Aoi, tell me you can at least ride.”

“I’m a Kaiga.” Aoiketsu eyed her as if she had insulted him. “Of course I can ride. What do you take me for?”

“You don’t want an answer to that.” Shishi muttered. “Shut up talking and prove it, will you? These are Papa... Kashira’s mountain horses an’ they don’t like idiots, so you’d better be right.”

“I can manage a horse quite well, thank you.” Aoiketsu approached the tree, pausing then holding his hand out to rub the nose of the nearest animal. “I’ve been riding since I was three or four. You needn’t worry about my ability in that department. It’s only with blood that I have a significant handicap.”

“Useful when we might be going into battle.” Shishi sighed.

“Hikari, are you really afraid to ride a horse on your own?” Myoume asked gently, and Hikari nodded.

“Terrified.” She admitted. “I hate horses. I mean, I don’t hate them, exactly — but the whole idea of being on their back. It was... it was bad enough when I was riding with Jin, and he was so patient with me. He never let me fall or anything. I can’t do it on my own. It might seem pathetic, but it’s just not the same where I’m from. I never rode a horse at all until I came here.”

“Never?” Aoiketsu stared at her. “You walked everywhere?”

“No... but I used... other things.” Hikari coloured slightly at his incredulity. “Like carriages. Coaches. Those things.”

“Your family must be of some means, then.” Aoiketsu decided. “If you are able to utilise such things.”

“Not really. But... it’s difficult to explain.” Hikari shook her head. “And that’s just how it is. In this place it really doesn’t help not to know anything about riding.”

“Well, this is simple enough.” Aoiketsu smiled. “I’m afraid I’m not your bandit friend, Hikari. And I’m probably neither as strong nor as capable a young man as he was. But I am a good, steady rider. If you wish, you can ride with me. You have my word that I am skilled enough not to make it a trial for you. You will not fall... I guarantee that there will be no danger.”

“But...” Hikari faltered, and Shishi shook her head.

“He’s right.” She said briskly. “If you won’t ride with me, and you won’t ride alone, you’ll have to ride with him or with Myoume. And we need Myoume to keep her senses alert for Miramu so she won’t be able to focus her attention on you. You might even scramble her senses, being so close. And to be honest, I don’t really want you with me. I’m not as tall as Jin was and knowin’ my luck you’ll have the both of us off the damn thing if you cling to me like you did to him. If Aoi is tellin’ the truth, you better do as he says an’ ride with him.”

“I’m not lying.” Aoiketsu assured her. “I truly have ridden for almost my whole life. And I will not let harm come to you, Hikari. You have my word.”

“A Kutou exile’s word ain’t as good as a bandit’s, but it’ll have to do.” Shishi added. “So it’s decided.”

“Hey... I didn’t say anything yet.” Hikari objected, and Aoiketsu smiled, crossing the grass and taking her by the arm. Carefully he led her back towards the horses, slipping his hand over hers as he guided it up towards the beast’s nose. The animal whinnied and patted the ground with his hoof, but he did not pull back, and gently Aoiketsu

placed Hikari's hand against the warm, soft fur of the animal's muzzle.

"There. All you have to do is make friends first." He said quietly. "That's what I was taught, when I was a boy. Make friends with the beast and then you'll know he won't hurt you. He can sense your fear and it will make him afraid — but if you and I both greet him like this, he will be calm and he will let us ride him without any problem."

Hikari's eyes widened and she glanced from the animal to the soldier, looking at him in surprise.

"Make friends with it?" She repeated. Aoiketsu nodded.

"Yes." He agreed. "See — does it seem so frightening now, this close to him? He's steady enough — a good tempered beast. He won't hurt you. Horses aren't predators. They're gentle grazers by nature. The only reason he would rise up against you is if he was afraid. And if you're not scared, nor will he be. That's the true secret to being a safe rider. To trust the horse, and to make the horse trust in you."

"Blah, babble babble babble." Shishi muttered, and Myoume laughed.

"Aoi's right, though." She reflected. "And since Hikari's introduced herself to that beast, she and Aoi should ride him now. Shishi, you're most used to riding the chestnut, correct? Which will leave the grey for me."

"Right." Shishi nodded her head. "Okay, if that's what we're doing — fine. Aoi, do you need help getting Hiki up on the back of him?"

"No... it's fine. I can manage." Aoiketsu shook his head. "You worry about loosing the tethers on you own beast. I'll help Hikari. I have to be of some use, after all."

Shishi eyed him for a moment. Then she inclined her head in acknowledgement.

"Got it." She agreed, reaching across to grab the leather thongs that bound the animal to the tree branch. "We want to make it to Taichi-ike by nightfall if we can, so we need to get moving."

"Are you sure it's okay — that you can get me on his back without me falling?" Hikari eyed Aoiketsu anxiously, and Aoiketsu laughed, nodding his head.

"Nothing easier." He assured her. "He's still tethered and he can't go anywhere... I won't loose him yet. Put your foot here... and hold on to these tightly, all right?"

He slipped the reins into her fingers, offering her a grin.

“Got them?”

“Yes, but...”

“Then trust me.” Aoiketsu slipped his arm around her, carefully and deftly hoisting her into the saddle. Hikari let out an exclamation, but before she could lose her grasp her companion had pulled himself up behind her, reaching around her trembling body to grasp the reins firmly in his own hands.

“There. You see? That wasn’t so unpleasant, was it?”

“I... I guess... but he’s still tied up.”

“Not a problem.” Aoiketsu assured her, gently pressing his feet against the horse’s side as the beast tossed his head slightly, taking a pace or two towards the tree. “Just hold on tightly to the reins for me for a moment, okay? I’m going to let go and I don’t want you to slip.”

As Shishi watched, Aoiketsu reached up to grab the tree branch that hung over their head, using it as a balance as he leant across to unknot the horse’s tethers with his free hand. Despite herself, she had to admit that the ease with which their new acquaintance loosened the horse’s ties indicated long experience with doing such things, and she sighed, tightening her own grip on her horse’s reins as she pulled herself atop the chestnut mare. Beside her, Myoume was already mounted, adjusting her reins to better suit her as she turned to glance back at the Ri farmstead.

“Chichiri’s coming.” She said softly. “I guess he’s going to see us off.”

“And wish you luck, too.” Chichiri pushed back the door, leaning up against the doorframe as his gaze flitted between each of them in turn. He nodded, smiling.

“Take care, you know, and come back safely.” He continued. “Successfully, if you can... but safely is more important. All right?”

“We know.” Shishi nodded. “We’ll be all right, Chichiri. We will.”

“I’m sure you will.” Chichiri agreed. “Suzaku should be proud of you.”

“Byakko, too.” Myoume glanced up at the sky. “Maybe even Seiryuu too — who knows?”

“Seiryuu?” Aoiketsu looked startled, and Myoume nodded.

You're from Kutou, just like I'm from Sairou. Our Gods have an interest in this too. "She said easily.

"I doubt Seiryuu cares much about me or about saving Kounan." Aoiketsu shook his head. "If he did, why would I be in exile?"

"To help, perhaps." Chichiri suggested. "After all — people are people. They're not automatically enemies because they come from different lands. War is a terrible thing begun by the ambitions of a few and fueled by fear and misunderstanding. But I think Myoume's right. The Gods don't fight in the way their people do. Maybe Seiryuu wanted you here to help Kounan. Who knows how the divine work?"

Aoiketsu stared at him, and Shishi was sure she saw a mixture of shock and dismay glitter briefly in the strange blue eyes. For a moment there was silence, then he shook his head.

"I don't know if many people in Kutou would agree." He said softly. "And I have no reason to call on Seiryuu for aid."

"Well, that's fine, because we're going to Hokkan to look for *Genbu*. Not Seiryuu." Shishi said frankly, picking up her reins. "And we're going, before we waste any more time. We'll be back soon, Chichiri — as soon as we can, don't worry about that. And tell Pa... Kashira that nothing in the north is going to kill any of us. I swear it as a bandit — we're *all* going to be coming back alive this time!"

Chapter 5

Chapter Four

The sun was shining over Kutou's capital city as Hyoushin and his party began their journey back towards the snowy peaks of Hokkan and the Genbu treasures that were hidden somewhere in the vast spread of land that constituted the largest of the four countries. It was not, he reflected, an ideal party — with four soldiers and two unpredictable mages in tow — but at least he had avoided the company of the enigmatic Sairou assassin.

“This journey will be troublesome enough, I fear, without that.” He mused as he twitched the reins of his white steed, urging the beast into a faster canter as he drew slightly ahead of his accompanying party. Although it was still early, he had already heard Suiko's penetrating tones complaining about the need for horrible, stinking horses and as the men's casual discussion had turned to the location of Genbu's treasures, he was sure he'd seen Ouno's wild dark eyes become wilder at the thought of coming face to face with the divine. Even now, the two mages were lagging behind the main party, exchanging insults as they trotted on at half the soldier's pace. Belatedly he wondered if it would have been better to undertake this entire mission on his own, and at this thought he allowed himself a faint, rueful smile.

It wasn't that his companions were the trouble, he acknowledged to himself wryly. It was his own hesitations that were making the entire progress seem like one unnecessary event after another.

The truth was that he did not want to go North again so soon.

He cast a fleeting glance behind him, as much to ensure that the two mages were not resorting to physical violence as to glance at his accompanying men. Bouri and Jakou were, as ever, looking on this simply as another military mission, their open, relaxed expressions telling the Meihi commander that they had ultimate faith in what they were doing and that they would be able to do it well. Between them, Ouno's expression was calmer than it had been, and Hyoushin reflected that perhaps in the stark light of day he had realised that no ghosts and demons would be following them on their mission north. Finally, his gaze rested on Kayu, and his eyes narrowed thoughtfully as he took in the preoccupation in the young man's dark eyes.

“Is he worried about Aoiketsu and Maichu?” He wondered. “Or something else? Of us all, he probably knows better the movements of the South. But he made report to the Emperor and myself with perfect clarity. And he did not seem quite so troubled then. I wonder what has occurred in the meantime — if anything indeed has.”

He chewed on his lip, turning his attention back to the landscape ahead of them as they began to negotiate a difficult stretch of path towards the pass Hyoushin had chosen to take them into Touran. Although it would add half an hour to their journey, he had been careful to skirt around the land that once belonged to the Meihi, and he hoped that none of his accompanying soldiers would notice the detour so blatantly. The last time they had travelled this way, the detour had been made necessary by the appearance of the unsettled local residents. But this time there was no one around to stop them, and Hyoushin berated himself inwardly for the weakness that kept him away from the land which had once been his home.

But he knew that he was not as composed this time as he had been on the previous trips. Knowing that there were Meihi in the Hokkan mountains had unsettled his long-concealed memories, and, although he would not admit it to himself, the absence of his two most loyal soldiers was also preying on his mind.

“Aoiketsu is smart, and Maichu resourceful. I should not worry so.” He murmured, pressing his toes against his horse’s flank to speed up the pace yet again. “The argument with Miramu has disturbed me, that is all. He won’t harm the Emperor — Kikei would surely not stand for that, and he claims to be able to control the man. I will have to just hope it’s so. I cannot disobey Kintsusei-sama’s direct order to travel, and nor can I explain to him the reasons why I would seek to do so. Everything becomes so very complicated — and the last thing I want to be doing is trespassing back into Meihi country.”

“Hyoushin-sama, are we making straight for Touran?”

Ouno’s voice broke through his musing and he nodded, glancing across as he realised the young soldier had more or less drawn his horse level.

“That was the plan.” He agreed. “Since we are familiar with it, it seems the best place. Besides, there is a connection between it and Genbu no Miko, Okuda Takiko. When we were last there, I read a plaque to that effect... so it seems a good place to begin a search for Genbu’s treasure.”

“We really don’t have a clue where we’re going, do we, sir?” Kayu

asked hesitantly, and Hyoushin pursed his lips.

“No.” He acknowledged. “But I believe we’re all resourceful enough to think of a way around that. It is vital we discover the Shinzahou’s location and that we do so before our neighbours to the south do. If we are to at any point cross that divide and enter into Kounan, we must have all the advantages over them that we can.”

“What kind of connection did Genbu no Miko have to Touran then, Commander?” Bouri looked faintly interested. “I thought she was a girl from the other world — wasn’t she?”

“Yes, so legend states.” Hyoushin agreed. “And Kikei-sama’s documents do not disagree. The connection is simply that she first appeared somewhere in the vicinity of the town that has grown and expanded since Hokkan was brought its peace two hundred or more years ago. The plaque is to mark that event.”

“I saw that, too.” Ouno remembered. “At least, there was something with an image of Genbu carved over it, but I couldn’t read the writing. A lady told me that it was connected to Okuda Takiko-sama. But it looked like a bunch of lines and scribbles to me. She said it was in Hokkan’s old script, or something.”

“You could read it, Commander?” Jakou asked, and Hyoushin’s eyes narrowed slightly as he inwardly berated himself for bringing up the subject. He nodded.

“Indeed.” He agreed lightly. “As it happens, the writing of the Hokkan people of that time is the same script that my own people brought with them when they left Hokkan for Kutou. Whilst the people of the North moved on, it seems that the Meihi preferred to keep to their traditions.”

“Guess its easy to forget that you’re a Meihi sometimes, sir.” Bouri scratched his head. “Y’sem like just another Easterner to me.”

Kayu sent his companion an incredulous glance at this, and although he refrained from commenting, Hyoushin could read his thoughts only too well. His frown deepened.

“I am glad.” He said quietly. “For I *am* a man of the East, just as you all are. Whatever the colour of my skin or eyes, I am as much of Kutou as any of the men I have trained in the Emperor’s name. This is, after all, the land of my birth.”

“No kidding.” Jakou grinned. “I don’t think we should worry too much about Genbu’s treasure, or about Kounan’s. We’re strong enough to take on anyone that gets in our way, sir — there ain’t much any of

us wouldn't do to serve the Emperor."

"Quite." Hyoushin nodded his head at this. "Again, I am glad you have such feeling inside of you."

His gaze rested briefly on Kayu, and the young soldier glanced at him, startled.

"Hyoushin-sama?"

"You seem quiet, Kayu." Hyoushin murmured. "Are you, perhaps, concerned for Aoiketsu and Maichu in the South? Or is it simply tiredness from your heavy ride yesterday? You made good time to get back to the palace, but it must be taking its toll."

Kayu hesitated for a moment, and then he sighed, shaking his head.

"Maybe I am worried. About things." He said slowly. "But... I'm not tired, Hyoushin-sama. I mean, I can handle the ride... and all of that. It's not been... too bad, and I'm fit enough. As for Aoi and Maichu..."

He faltered, then shrugged.

"I think they can do what they were sent to do." He concluded finally. "Maichu and I talked long and hard about what the best course of action would be for whichever of us stayed behind, and I don't think he'll deviate from that. So no... I'm not worried about them exactly. I just... want everything to go well."

Hyoushin's lips thinned, and he slowly nodded his head.

"I agree." He said softly. "To which end, it would be pleasant to reach Hokkan's border by nightfall. We must not dally in Eastern land."

"We could cut a half hour or more off our trip if we went straight across the river and through the plains." Jakou suggested, and Ouno let out an exclamation, shaking his head.

"Are you crazy?" He hissed. "Don't you know that there are ghosts in that land?"

"Ghosts?" Jakou snorted. "Shut up, you idiot. We're soldiers. Not girls. You don't really believe in ghosts?"

"Ghosts, spirits, demons... damn right I do." Ouno snapped back. "And you'll be the one sorry if we trespass on their ground and wake them up! You know that people were massacred in that area during Shoukitei's reign! There must be hundreds of bodies buried under the ground — can you imagine what kind of spiritual nightmare that would be, if we were to disturb them?"

Despite himself, Hyoushin bit down hard on his lip.

“The course we are taking was agreed with the Emperor.” He said quietly. “So there will be no deviations. I am not interested in attempting short-cuts that have not been properly cleared beforehand. We do not know, after all, what kind of rebels operate in which areas. Especially not guerrilla fighters. Remember your comrades in the Southern Province and be a little more circumspect. This path is more likely to be safe, and we will continue to use it. More haste and less speed, after all.”

“See.” Ouno said triumphantly. “You’re arguing with the Emperor, Jakou. He doesn’t want us to get possessed or attacked by spirits either.”

“Bullshit.” Jakou said derisively. “He’s not afraid of ghosts and nor is Hyoushin-sama. Rebels I can believe in — real people with swords and arrows, fine. But you really need to get a grip on your wits. I swear you get crazier by the day.”

“I’m not crazy!” Ouno defended himself. “You must know the stories. All this land was cleared during Shoukitei’s reign, and...”

“That is enough.” Hyoushin could stand no more, and he reined in his horse, turning to cast them both a disapproving look. “This is not the kind of conversation I want to hear when we’re riding North on such an important Imperial mission. If I thought you were going to have a barracks squabble on the ride, I may have thought twice about bringing you along. You are both far too old for such teenage interactions.”

Ouno’s eyes widened, and colour seemed to drain from his face as realisation dawned in his dark eyes. He gulped, then bowed his head apologetically in his Commander’s direction.

“I... I’m sorry, Hyoushin-sama.” He murmured. “I... I forgot that... that was... Meihi land.”

Silence greeted Ouno’s comment, as one by one the accompanying soldiers exchanged looks with one another, then glanced at their pale-skinned, aloof Commander. Hyoushin frowned.

“That is neither here nor there.” He said evenly. “This is the path charted by the Emperor, and we will follow it. Besides, that land is dead. There are no Meihi there now, so it is not Meihi land. It is dead. Just as Jakou said. Empty. And the province of northern rebels, so we will not risk crossing it.”

He paused, gathering his composure, then, “Is there any further

dissention?”

More silence, and Hyoushin nodded.

“Very well.” He said crisply. “Then we will continue. And Kitora, Suiko — try and keep up with everyone else. You’re barely within earshot and I do not wish to leave you behind.”

“Yes, you do. You’d love to.” Kitora snapped out at him, kicking her horse bad-temperedly as it whinnied its objection, kicking out as it galloped up to join the tail end of the soldier’s party. “But your Emperor won’t let you.”

“Perhaps that’s true.” Hyoushin’s eyes were expressionless. “Either way, I will not lose sight of you. Suiko, you too. And I do not wish to hear your thoughts on the Northern peoples... we are going North regardless.”

“I wasn’t going to say anything.” Suiko said sullenly, bringing her steed up to join Kitora’s.

“Then all is well.” Hyoushin responded. “We are wasting time. I already told you that I wished to make the border by nightfall — let us not tarry here any longer.”

He nudged his horse back into the lead, setting off at a brisk trot, but even as he did so, he could hear the lowered voices of his companions and a mixture of anger and mortification rushed through him as he identified their topic of conversation.

“You two are a pair of idiots!” That was Bouri. “You damn well know we don’t talk about that... now or ever! Shit, Hyoushin-sama’s our Commander, he ain’t just another guy in the barracks. You want a whip taken to you?”

“Hyoushin-sama doesn’t use the whip.” Jakou pointed out, and Bouri snorted.

“He just might, if you start yellin’ about tactless shit like that!” He retorted. “So can it, both of you!”

“Like as not we’re going this way because Kintsusei-sama wouldn’t ask Hyoushin-sama to cross the former Meihi land. After all, for all we know, the Commander was part of that settlement. He *did* say he was born in the East.”

That was Kayu, more perceptive than his fellows, and inwardly Hyoushin cursed the boy’s intelligence. “I think you upset him, Ouno. He looked a little pissed.”

“It wasn’t just me! It was Jakou too!” Ouno objected.

“Yeah, but you were the one who was goin’ on about dead spirits an’ slaughter.” Jakou objected.

“You should all shut up.” That was Suiko, and Hyoushin’s eyes widened in surprise as he registered her voice. “He told you to, so do it. Stupid soldiers. Don’t you know anything?”

“What has it to do with you?” Jakou asked, and Suiko sighed.

“I’m Seiryuu’s mage. You should talk to me nicely, you rude, dirty soldier.” She said frankly. “And you shouldn’t say things to upset Hyoushin.”

“We didn’t upset him.” Jakou pointed out. “He’s fine.”

“Is he?” Kayu murmured, and Hyoushin’s grip on his reins tightened as unbidden images flashed across his senses.

A burning home, a man standing strong and determined before his enemy, wielding a stick in his hand. The cries of a small girl, terrified as she called for her brother, and a small boy of ten racing through the village, wild silver hair flying in all directions as he sought to help his father defend his family.

He closed his eyes briefly, forcing the pictures back.

“A dead life. Dead land.” He told himself firmly. “This is not why we’re going North. I will *not* be swayed from my purpose so easily.”

“He looks okay to me.” Bouri admitted. “Pretty much as normal, I’d say. You were lucky, the both of you — you only got a scolding.”

“Kayu, what’s biting you?” Jakou demanded, and there was a pause.

“Nothing.” Somehow the young man’s words sounded false to Hyoushin’s ears. “It’s nothing. Just... lets change the subject, before he hears us and starts dishing out real punishments. Aoi’s not here to sweet-talk him, after all — and we don’t want to see whether he will use a whip or not.”

“Aoi-kun?” Bouri sounded startled. “Why would it matter if he was here?”

“Aoi could sweet-talk his way out of Kounan’s death row. That’s why *he’s* been sent south.” Jakou said ruefully. “Because he’s a Kaiga an’ he has all the gentle manners of a noble, or somethin’ stupid. Guess it’s in the blood or somethin’ — you grew up more or less at court too, Kayu, but you’re right. Aoi is in a different league from the

rest of us.”

“Aoi pukes up at the sight of blood.” Bouri said, confused. “Sure, he’s a good soldier, but...”

“It’s not that.” Kayu sighed. “Just... even though he and I have fought in the past, I... I guess I’d really rather we were doing this journey with him. That’s all. You mightn’t see it, but I... I think the Commander’s on edge. I don’t think he wants to come North an’ I think it’s because he’s worryin’ about Aoi an’ Maichu in the south. An’ it worries me. That’s all.”

“You worry far too much. You’re worse than Ouno.” Bouri said frankly. “Hyoushin-sama is fine.”

“And we were changing the subject.” Ouno shot his elder a dark look. “So lets.”

“Worried about Aoiketsu...” Hyoushin mused, his brows knitting together as he considered Kayu’s words. “So that is it, after all. Does he really sense my own unease, though? Or is it just another case of him claiming it’s my hesitation when in fact it’s his own? I wish I had a better way to understand that boy... but at least, if its just concern for a friend... I suppose we all have our doubts about going back to Hokkan.”

He sighed, glancing down at his reins.

“Me most of all.” He admitted sadly. “I only hope I can keep them from getting in the way of my mission.”

So this was Taichi-ike.

Hikari stood on the banks of the large oasis of a lake, gazing pensively out across the glittering water as she contemplated their journey so far. On the horizon, the darkening of the sky told her that night was almost upon them, and already she could make out the faint glimmer of the summer moon as it rose to take precedence over the sky. Behind her, her travel companions were preparing for the night, and as Aoiketsu saw to the horses, Shishi and Myoume had set their attentions to preparing something for an evening meal. Although Hikari had offered her help, Shishi had quickly scorned it, telling her that they didn’t have all night to do it, but there had been no malice in the bandit’s impatience and Hikari had not taken offence. Instead she had withdrawn to the water’s edge, secretly glad of a moment alone to think things over.

It had been a long, hot ride through the forests of Kounan, where

even the shade of the trees had afforded little relief from the climbing sun, and she was sore and bruised from the mode of transport. Still, she mused ruefully, it could have been worse.

“At least Aoi kept me from falling.” She murmured, kneeling down to drift her fingers through the rippling cool water. “He’s as good a rider as Jin was. Maybe better. Certainly... a little gentler. Maybe it’s because of who he is — I can’t tell. But I... I suppose I did feel... safe, when I knew he was protecting me.”

She bit her lip, remembering her bandit friend as for a brief instant she thought she saw his likeness in the surface of the water. Then it was gone, and she shook her head, knowing it had been nothing more than her imagination.

“Jin is gone, but we’re still moving forwards.” She realised. “It feels strange, that way. That he’s not really dead... that he’s not really been left behind on the mountain, cased in stone. I only knew you for a few weeks, Jin — I wish I’d had a chance to know you for longer. It feels like I did... like we were truly friends. And I wish you were with us now. But... but we’ll be okay. I hope you know that. I’m safe, and so is Shishi. And we won’t forget — we’ll finish what we all began. We’re still a team — don’t think that we’re not.”

She sighed, reaching up to loose the ribbon that held her thick hair in its customary braid, allowing the slight breeze to ruffle through the dark waves. Jin’s death had affected her badly, she knew that, but it had pierced more deeply through her young, flame-haired friend, and Hikari wished there was some way she could help.

“Shishi’s not the kind of girl to break down and talk about her feelings.” She realised. “So I guess... this is all I can do. Just wait and if she wants to... I guess... listen to her talk.”

She pursed her lips.

“I don’t even think I’d feel this way if Makoto died.” She admitted to herself, surprised by the truth of this statement. “Even though he’s my brother by blood, I... I don’t think I would. I’d be sad, of course. Especially for Mother and Father. But... Shishi and Jin were like proper siblings. They didn’t fight all the time... but even when they did you knew it wasn’t really meant. Everyone in this world seems to suffer such huge burdens and sacrifices. Maybe I am just weak after all. But I can’t let myself be any more. For Jin’s sake. I can’t.”

She settled herself more comfortably on the grass, her hair whipping gently around her face as she met her gaze in the water. A resolute young girl stared back, and despite herself, Hikari was

startled by the change.

“I look... more decided. More determined.” She decided, reaching down to disperse the image once more. “Because of Jin? Or something else? I wish I knew whether I even had any power of my own, or if it was all Suzaku’s.”

She frowned.

“I’m sorry, Jin. I wasn’t in love with you, but you still died for me.” She added. “I think you knew... from how you spoke, I don’t think you asked me to be. But I still... feel bad about it, anyway.”

She reached up to touch her lips absently.

“You were the first boy to kiss me, but I can’t even be angry with you for doing that.” She added sadly. “You knew... it was a kiss goodbye. You said then that... that later, we could talk. Later, I could yell. But even when you said it, you knew... there might not be a later. And because you knew that... I... I’m not angry with you for kissing me. Or anything else. I wish I could have told you I loved you too — but I couldn’t and I can’t. At least, not in that way. But... you knew. I’m sure you knew. Even if we can’t talk about it... I’m sure you understood.”

“You look pensive, Hikari.”

Aoiketsu’s voice startled her and she swung around, offering him a rueful smile as she nodded her head.

“I guess I was just thinking about a few things.” She said softly. “With everything how it is, I suppose I haven’t had a chance to do that of late.”

“Should I leave you, then?” Aoiketsu looked anxious. “Shishi and Myoume are almost finished preparing food and I said I’d come find you, since the horses are all taken care of for the night. Myoume said you were at the water’s edge... but if you want to be alone...”

He trailed off, and Hikari shook her head.

“It’s all right.” She assured him, getting to her feet and dusting her skirt down. “I’ll come back with you.”

“Were you thinking about... your friend Jin?” Aoiketsu asked quietly, and Hikari nodded slowly.

“I was.” She admitted. “Am I that transparent?”

“No, but you looked very deep in thought. Very... solemn.” Aoiketsu admitted. “And I thought... it must be... the bandit friend

you lost.”

“Yeah.” Hikari sighed. “It’s weird us being here like this without him. It’s stupid but I find it hard to believe he’s gone, now we’re away from the mountain. It’s all right, though. I’ll get to grips with it. It’s just... strange. Surreal. That’s all.”

“Death in one so young is not easy to accept.” Aoiketsu looked serious, and Hikari shook her head.

“No kidding.” She agreed. “But like I said — I’ll get to grips with it.”

She offered him a faint smile.

“Thank you for letting me ride with you today, by the way. You really are a good horseman — and I felt almost safe in the saddle with you. Tomorrow won’t be so bad, if you don’t mind me riding with you again.”

“You’re always welcome.” Aoiketsu assured her, a smile lighting up his own unusual seiran gaze. “It’s the least I can do.”

“You’re not so useless after all, really.” Hikari told him. “You can read maps and ride a horse. That’s two things I can’t do.”

Aoiketsu was silent for a moment, his gaze drawn out across the lake as he glanced at the glitters of early moonlight on the shining surface.

“Water is Seiryuu’s element.” He murmured, then he shook his head. “No, Hikari. I’m more useless than you think. There’s a lot of things I can’t do.”

“Like save Kutou, maybe?” Hikari asked. Aoiketsu started, then he sighed.

“Can anyone truly do that?” He wondered helplessly. “When I think of it...”

He trailed off, and Hikari bit her lip.

“I’m sorry.” She said guiltily. “I suppose even though you’re in exile, it’s still your birthplace. And your home.”

“Right now it’s not anything.” Aoiketsu seemed to rally himself, shaking his head. “My concerns are the concerns of the people of Kounan. And especially your concerns, Hikari — because you have been kind to me since the day I arrived in the Eastern Village.”

Hikari stared at him. Then she smiled, nodding her head.

"I told you. We're friends." She responded. "And I'm glad you've come along. You might think you're helpless, but it's not that at all. You're gentle — that's all. Like when you helped me with the horse. You understand things. Even if you're not naturally quick to draw a sword and fight for your country... I like how you are."

Aoiketsu looked stricken at this, and Hikari frowned.

"Aoi?" She murmured. "Did I say something to upset you?"

"Upset me?" Aoiketsu stared. Then he shook his head.

"No, of course not." He replied evenly. "Why would you have?"

"You gave me such a strange look just then."

"I suppose I'm not used to being praised for weakness." Aoiketsu said ruefully. "You may or may not know, Hikari, but Seiryuu doesn't just stand for the element of Water, or the land in the East. He is also the Beast God most associated with fighting. The soldier's Dragon. And I..."

"You don't live up to that, huh?" Hikari's gaze softened. "It's all right. You don't have to. Koutaku-san told me that Kutou's people had been ripping chunks out of each other for years. I think it's a good thing if you don't want to join in."

"Koutaku-san." Aoiketsu said thoughtfully. "This name you've mentioned before. Is he, then, someone from my homeland?"

"Yes. Amiboshi." Hikari agreed. "But he lives in Hokkan. I don't think we'll see him on this trip — he lives away from Touran, and Chichiri doesn't think he'll know where Genbu's treasure is. But he hated the fighting in Kutou. That's why he's in exile, like you. He found safety and sanctuary with a family in the North."

"Amiboshi." Aoiketsu murmured the name softly. "Yes. I recall you saying you had encountered him. A surviving Seishi of Seiryuu, yet even he disdains to protect his native land. Who knows? Maybe even *Seiryuu's* abandoned Kutou this time."

He sighed, shaking his head as if to clear it.

"But such things are no concern of mine." He added. "And Shishi will be wondering what's taking us so long. Will you come with me, Hikari? It will be dark soon and we should all stick together. After all, danger most commonly strikes in the darkness."

"I'm coming." Hikari nodded. "You're probably right. Although with Myoume's senses, I doubt anyone will get too near."

“She is an uncanny individual.” Aoiketsu agreed ruefully as they made their way slowly back towards where their two companions had been busily sorting through the food supplies Aidou had ensured they had packed into their saddle-bags before departing North. “I have to admit... it unnerves me somewhat. Like having eyes on you always... even when they’re not.”

“But if it keeps us safe?” Hikari asked, and Aoiketsu nodded.

“Oh, I know. I just... am not used to... all this Seishi business.” He responded slowly. “Chichiri-san, Tasuki-san and Myoume-san are the first I’ve had the fortune to meet. I did not know there was a living Seishi for Seiryuu till you spoke of him, and there are certainly no Seiryuu Seishi in the East now. So it is a foreign concept for me.”

“That’s probably why your country’s so screwed up.” Shishi put in at this juncture, as the two rejoined their comrades. “Yeesh, I thought you could navigate, Aoi — what took so long?”

“We were talking.” Hikari said simply, dropping down onto the grass as she cast her gaze over the small picnic of food spread out on Myoume’s cape. “Aidou-san sure has spoiled us, hasn’t she? Sending us with this much to tide us over.”

Aidou-obasama takes things like that seriously. “Shishi admitted.” But I ain’t complaining.”

“After a long journey, it’s welcome.” Myoume agreed, curling up against the trunk of a tree as she helped herself to fish. “Aoi-kun, are you joining us or what? You’re standing staring at it as if it might bite you — you should know by now that Aidou-san’s food is good stuff.”

“Oh. No. It isn’t that.” Aoiketsu reddened, obediently settling himself down on the grass as he held out his hand for one of the rough wooden travel plates Shishi thrust his way. “Thank you, Shishi. No, I was just contemplating on what was said — that Kutou’s current situation is down to the lack of Celestial Warriors. Perhaps this is the case. After all, in Kounan there *are* Chichiri-san and Tasuki-san. And you’re from Sairou, Myoume-san. But there is noone like that in my native land.”

“We don’t know that for sure.” Hikari reflected. “And don’t forget that Sairou doesn’t just have Myoume. It has Miramu too.”

“Aoi is right, though, in a sense.” Myoume sat back, looking thoughtful. “It’s something I’ve thought about too. Chichiri said that you retrieved Seiryuu’s Shinzahou from Amiboshi and Suboshi in the north country — in Hokkan, before my brother forced you to

relinquish it. But there are no Celestial Warriors in Kutou, exactly. Suboshi had not been reborn — he was merely a spirit. And Amiboshi had no interest in fighting for Kutou or getting involved in any of this beyond helping the family of old friends. Perhaps the political state of Kutou has prevented the Seishi from being reincarnated properly as guardians — otherwise it doesn't seem logical for the treasures to be so dispersed. Kutou's the only land without peace — the pattern for the other lands seems fairly clear and established."

"Do you mean that there might be reborn Celestial Warriors in Hokkan who are Genbu's, too?" Shishi said sharply. Myoume nodded.

"I think it's likely." She agreed. "Seishi are charged with the duty of protecting treasures. Think about it."

"So Papa is the one who's protecting Suzaku's relic, within Reikakuzan." Shishi said thoughtfully. "Because that's where Taiitsukun said it was, right? And that means..."

"The Shinzahou has effectively become Chichiri's responsibility. Yes." Myoume's gaze flitted briefly to Aoiketsu, and then to Hikari, offering her a faint smile. "If my brother had accepted his role as Amefuri, I imagine that our duty would have involved protecting both the relic and the Shinzahou in a much more competent manner. As it was, it rather fell to me to do both."

She spread her hands.

"Kutou is a little more complicated." She added. "As I said, Suboshi is dead. Had any of the other warriors been revived, then responsibility for the treasures would have fallen to them. Amiboshi must be the only living Seishi. But because Suboshi's spirit is tied to him, I suppose they both reside in Hokkan. There was no one protecting the relic of Seiryuu."

"So Kutou were able to find it easy, huh?" Shishi frowned. "Figures."

"On the contrary." Myoume shook her head. "The spirit of the mage can only be awoken with Celestial blood."

"Then Koutaku-san helped Kutou after all?" Hikari looked startled. Myoume frowned, shaking her head.

"I don't think so." She murmured. "I don't think he's been to the East for a long time. From what Chichiri said, his sole concern is the safety of his family in the North. But it is interesting, isn't it? There's a lot we don't know about Kutou even now. They seem to be a step ahead. Somehow they managed to wake a sleeping spirit and

command control of her — even without a living Seishi to draw from. I wonder how that came about.”

“You’re quiet.” Shishi jabbed Aoiketsu in the ribs, causing him to start and drop his plate.

“Why did you do that?” He demanded, glaring at her, and Shishi pulled a face at him.

“You were sitting there staring into space an’ wastin’ Aidou-obasama’s food.” She scolded. “Don’t tell me all this stuff is too smart for you — I thought you were some kind of a genius.”

“I never said that.” Aoiketsu recovered himself, shaking his head. “But I told you — my knowledge of Celestial Warriors is limited to you people. This is all new and difficult to follow. I am not accustomed...”

“Shut *up* with the formal speak already, will you!? Please, at least once, try and speak like a normal person!” Shishi interrupted, and Aoiketsu sighed.

“I don’t complain about your cursing or your mountain drawl.” He said lightly. “It wouldn’t be polite for me to do so. Please extend the same courtesy to me, Shishi.”

“Mountain *drawl*?” Indignation flickered into Shishi’s bronze eyes, and Hikari laughed, resting a hand on her friend’s arm.

“Shh. Stop it. Both of you.” She said firmly. “Else you’ll attract every wild animal in the area, not to mention any thieves or vagabonds. We’re not on Reikaku-zan right now — they won’t be on our side.”

“You’re learning fast, Hikari-chan.” Myoume sent her a warm grin. “Shishi should know better.”

“You’re all ganging up on me.” Shishi said sullenly. “If Jin was here...”

“Shishi-chan, stop it.” Myoume shook her head, her expression becoming serious as she reached out to touch her young friend’s hand. “I know how you feel. Better than anyone, I know. Even if I hadn’t lost my own brother in the way I had, your grief screams out of your aura so loudly that I’d have to be dead not to feel it. But listen. For Jin’s sake — stop it. You’re stronger than that. Aren’t you?”

Shishi hesitated. Then she sighed, burying her head in her hands.

“It just seems weird, is all.” She murmured. “I get it. It’s just...”

different. Hiki an' Jin an' me were a team. An... I don't think this is the same way."

"You don't think we're a team?" Hikari looked surprised. Shishi frowned, glancing at her friend for a moment. Then she shrugged.

"You and I are, maybe." She owned. "Even Myoume, some, I suppose... now. But..."

Her gaze fell on Aoiketsu, and Myoume sighed heavily.

"If we're to succeed at all, you'll have to get over this." She said categorically. "Aoi's done nothing to antagonise you since he's been with us. On the contrary — he's proving helpful. Give him some credit for that, will you?"

"Maybe that's what bugs me." Shishi admitted, and Aoiketsu's eyes widened in surprise.

"Why would that be a problem?" He asked, startled. Shishi shrugged.

"I don't know." She owned. "Maybe because it's like Jin's been replaced, and... aw, shit, it doesn't make sense when I say it out loud. Maybe it doesn't even in my head. It ain't really you, Aoi."

She grimaced at him apologetically.

"I guess I'm sorry. I just... it's not your fault. It's like Myoume said... you're pullin' your weight. Takin' Hiki on the horse an' all... ignore it. I'm okay."

Hikari eyed her for a moment. Then she turned her gaze back to the Seishi.

"Myoume, do you think there is something that the East might know about Shinzahou... something we don't know?" She asked hesitantly. "If they've managed to do something with their relic... we've not tried to do anything with Suzaku's one yet, even if we know it's in the mountain, and that Tasuki's effectively right on top of it. But if they don't have any Seishi... how could they manage?"

Myoume pursed her lips.

"I suspect that my brother's blood has been used to raise the Byakko mage Kitora, and that Miramu's cooperation with the West now makes her an ally of theirs." She said softly. "But as for Seiryuu's mage Suiko... the water witch... I can only theorise. That someone with Seishi blood must have crossed the threshold of the shrine and broken the seal."

“You just said they were all dead.” Shishi objected. “So how is that possible?”

“Maybe one of them had children.” Aoiketsu said quietly, and Shishi snorted.

“They were fightin’ Kounan, weren’t they?” She said scornfully. “Chichiri an’ Kashira didn’t have families till way after the war ended. All of Seiryuu’s ’cept Amiboshi died in that war. How would they have found time to have children?”

Myoume’s eyes narrowed.

“Still, Aoiketsu might be right.” She said frankly. “We really don’t know.”

Aoiketsu glanced at his hands, and Hikari could tell that he was considering the point very carefully.

“I suppose that, when your parents are dead, its easy not to know things about them.” He said at length. “There may well be children out there in the East who have connections even they don’t realise they have. A cousin. A nephew... maybe even they would have this power you speak of.”

“I suspect that only a direct child of a Celestial Warrior would have enough latent spirit energy in their blood to even begin to break such a sacred seal.” Myoume shook her head, and Hikari saw a flicker of something unreadable in her indigo eyes. “Perhaps not even then — it’s not like the divine selection of Seishi is a heritable thing, after all. But it’s an interesting thought. And one we’re not going to find an answer to tonight.”

She stretched, glancing up at the moon.

“We should rest.” She added. “I’ll sit up and keep watch — I can go nights without sleep, thanks to Toroki’s demands on my body. And I’ll keep my senses primed. Taichi-ike is probably a safe enough place, but just in case... I’ll be alert.”

“Are you sure?” Shishi asked, and Myoume nodded.

“It’s quite fine.” She agreed. “Believe me — two or three nights without sleep won’t affect me even a little bit. I’m used to it — I told you. It’s nothing new for me.”

“Then we should do as you say.” Hikari decided. “I am tired, and this place is so peaceful and beautiful. Mother and Father probably came here in the past, too — which is a nice thing to think. Even if it was a long time before I was born.”

“Kashira saved Miaka-sama’s life once, from that lake.” Shishi nodded, and Hikari stared at her in surprise.

“Really?”

“Yes.” Shishi agreed. “I wouldn’t have believed it, because he’s a lousy swimmer and hates the water. But Chichiri said it was true. I guess to protect the Miko, even a fire-throwing bandit can brave a little water, huh?”

Her words were nonchalant, but there was a flicker of pride in her bronze eyes, and Hikari grinned, secretly relieved to see a little of her friend’s usual spirit in the expression. She nodded.

“Mother can’t swim at all, even now.” She agreed. “I guess it was a case of instinct.”

“Wait...” Aoiketsu frowned. “Hikari — your mother was... the Miko? Suzaku no... Suzaku no Miko?”

“Yes.” Hikari looked surprised. “Yuuki Miaka. Although she’s Sukunami Miaka now.”

“But... I thought that the... the Miko... came from another world?” Aoiketsu’s brows knitted together, and Hikari bit her lip.

“It’s a bit complicated.” She hazarded, but before she could go any further, Myoume rested a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“And entirely irrelevant when we’ve things to tidy up and camp to set.” She said softly. “Else it will be pitch black and we won’t even have a fire. It might still be warm now, but it will cool down as the night draws in. Enough gossiping, all of you — I don’t want any of you catching cold before we’ve even reached Hokkan’s snow.”

“Good point.” Hikari flushed. “Sorry, Myoume. I guess you’re right.”

“That’s why Chichiri’s trusting me to take charge of this little trip.” Myoume’s eyes twinkled. “You too, Aoi — you can collect firewood, I’m sure? Hikari and I will clear up here, and Shishi’s the expert on starting fires.”

“You want me to find flint.” Shishi nodded. “No problem. Leave it to me.”

With that she was gone into the darkness, and Myoume sighed, glancing from Aoiketsu to Hikari and then shaking her head.

“Sometimes I forget how young she is.” She murmured, more than half to herself. “Aoi-kun, I’m sorry.”

Aoiketsu spread his hands.

“She’s grieving.” He said quietly. “And if it were me, losing a friend like that... I would not be able to be as proactive as she is. She’s strong... and I respect that strength. Besides, all I’ve heard of this Rou Jintsui has been good. He’s an obvious loss to your party and I am sorry for it.”

“See. I told you you were kind.” Hikari flashed him a grin, and Aoiketsu looked self conscious, shaking his head.

“I don’t think that’s so.” He murmured. “But I must go find firewood, before it becomes cold. We’ll want to start early tomorrow, I imagine... and the sooner we finish now, the sooner we can rest.”

He sent her a smile, then turned on his heel, heading off to complete his task and leaving Hikari alone with her Seishi companion. She sighed heavily, and Myoume cast her a sidelong glance.

“You and Aoi have become friendly already.” She murmured. “How friendly, Hikari?”

“Myoume?” Hikari pinkened, staring at her friend in dismay. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.” Myoume’s eyes twinkled with faint mischief. “Just that it’s hard not to notice the vibes going in each direction. You like him, I think.”

“I...” Hikari frowned, rubbing her temples. “This isn’t the time for that, so it’s a stupid question.”

“But you aren’t denying it?”

“I don’t know anything, right now.” Hikari shook her head. “And like I said, for Jin’s sake and for everything else, I’m not here to be adolescent. But Aoi is kind. And gentle. And smart. And I’m glad he’s with us. Even if Shishi isn’t — I am.”

“Even so, you should be careful how much you speak about your roots here, in open country.” Myoume advised her. “You don’t know who might be listening and we don’t want to generate any undue attention.”

“I know. I’ll be careful.” Hikari promised. “I won’t talk about it any more, I swear.”

“Then lets clean this lot up.” Myoume grinned. “As Aoi said, we’ll start early tomorrow. Dawn, if possible. I don’t want to waste time heading to the border. After all, Kutou are closer to it than we are —

if we've had a head start we need to take advantage of it as much as we can!"

Chapter 6

Chapter Five

Morning.

Aoiketsu stirred from his sleep, opening his eyes to the warm, gentle breeze of morning at the lakeside. Everything around him seemed tranquil and peaceful, as for a moment he watched two birds flying and dancing over his head, dark specks against a brilliant background of clear, endless blue.

He pulled himself into a sitting position, glancing around at his companions to see whether or not they were already awake. There was no sign of either Myoume or Shishi, but Hikari slept soundly beneath the branches of a nearby tree, and he hesitated, absorbing the look of peace and security on her face.

“She’s from the South. Everyone in the south takes peace for granted.” He murmured, his gaze scanning the surrounding area for his other two travel companions. “I wish it was like that in Kutou. I don’t think I’ve slept out like this anywhere in my homeland for a long time. Certainly not without full military camp of some kind, and people posted as sentries. But here... is different. Even though Myoume said she’d keep watch, it’s not like there’s anything to watch out for.”

“You’re up early.”

Shishi’s voice in his ear made him jump and he swung round, meeting her amused gaze with a startled one of his own.

“Whoops. Did I scare you? You seemed to be on some other planet.”

“I was thinking how beautiful it is here.” Aoiketsu admitted. Shishi shrugged.

“Kounan is, mostly.” She responded. “Except where there are still scars of the war. But they’re growin’ over now. The blitzed villages are bein’ repopulated. It’s not like it was right after it all happened. You’d expect it to be calm an’ beautiful again now — it’s been six years since the last catastrophe, after all.”

“Six years, huh?” Aoiketsu looked thoughtful, and Shishi nodded.

“I don’t remember a lot about it, except that Kashira had to leave

the mountain... an' that there wasn't much of a mountain left after a while." She reflected. "Kaa-san an' me wound up in the village with Aidou-obasama an' Eiju an' Meikyo, in the end — noone knew if the mountain was gonna hold up or not. Jin... Jin was there too. Eiju an' Meikyo were just brats, so we helped out."

"You can't have been so very old yourself." Aoiketsu pointed out, and Shishi bristled.

"I was eight. Almost nine." She snapped. "But that ain't important."

"I suppose not." Aoiketsu held up his hands. "My apologies. I meant no offence. I was simply not aware that Kounan had encountered troubles since the war with Kutou."

"Well, you're a foreigner so you wouldn'tve. It was a problem in this land — an' we settled it." Shishi shrugged. "Well, Papa did, an' Chichiri, an' Tamahome. They put it all to rights."

"Tamahome?" Aoiketsu was startled. "Hikari's father was here too, then?"

"Yeah." Shishi nodded. "I never saw him, though. But yeah, Kashira an' Chichiri both said so. An' Hikari was here too. Somehow. I don't understand it really. But in the end Suzaku no Miko wound up savin' Kounan for real that time. An' it's been all okay, since then."

"Suzaku no Miko." Aoiketsu bit his lip. "Then why isn't Tamahome-san here now? Why is it that Chichiri-san and Tasuki-san protect Kounan, but he's nowhere around? Wasn't Tamahome-san the legendary warrior who killed Nakago and saved Kounan? Chichiri-san and Tasuki-san are strong — but if Tamahome-san is that much stronger..."

"Tamahome no longer has his Celestial powers." Myoume's voice joined the conversation at this point, dropping down from her tree perch as she cast them both warm grins. "So he can't fight for Kounan any more. Things have changed, Aoi. Even the last time he was here, Tamahome did not have the same power he had when he fought Kutou's Shougun."

"I don't understand." Aoiketsu looked confused. "Why not?"

"He had to sacrifice 'em so he could stay with Miaka-sama." Shishi said frankly. "At least, that's what Pa... Kashira said. It was like that. An' Kounan didn't need him any more. So... that's what he did."

"None of this is as important as us getting ready to move on, however." Myoume said evenly. "Shishi-chan, wake Hikari, will you?"

We don't have much in the way of breakfast, and I don't know whether we'll have to camp out again tonight somewhere. But we probably have enough to at least keep us going. Aoi-kun, do you have Chichiri's map?"

"Yes, I have it." Aoiketsu nodded, pulling out the old sheet of parchment and smoothing it out before him on the ground. "We're at Taichi-ike. Which means that we're on a direct course for Choukou, just like Chichiri-san said."

"Choukou's gotta be at least two days ride from here, though." Shishi objected. "We'll need to find somewhere to camp for the night."

"Have you been there before, then?" Aoiketsu glanced up, and Shishi shook her head, crouching at Hikari's side as she gave her friend a rough shake to stir her.

"No. But I know it's a long way North, an' it's near the river that we camped out by on our way back from Hokkan the last time." She replied. "It's no more than a day and a half from Yukigase, so it must be at least two days ride from here. Only last time we had Chichiri with us, so we took a short cut back to Kahou through his *kasa*."

"Shishi's probably right." Myoume chewed on her lip. "Kounan isn't a big country in comparison to its neighbours, but even if we set off now, I doubt we could reach Choukou by nightfall. Even with the swift horses we have... even if we were to gallop."

"Myoume, please tell me I dreamed you saying the word 'gallop'." At that moment Hikari joined the conversation, sitting up as she wiped the sleep from her eyes. "Riding is bad enough. You'll be turning my hair white too, if you insist on that."

"I don't think it'll be necessary." Myoume laughed. "But we should find a safe place to stop, nonetheless."

"I think we can make it to Choukou tonight." Aoiketsu ran his finger over the map, then nodded, raising his gaze to the Seishi's. "In fact, I'm fairly certain of it."

"You have to be kidding." Shishi snorted, coming to peer over his shoulder. "What do you think these horses can do — fly?"

"Of course not." Aoiketsu shook his head. "But look. This pathway leads to Choukou, but it isn't very direct. It's the main thoroughfare, which means it will probably be busy and crowded, since there will be traders travelling between towns. However, there is another route that is less clearly marked. It seems to be more direct than the other... and if we took it, I believe we'd be in Choukou before nightfall. The sun

sets late in Kounan in the summer, I've noticed. We should have plenty of time, if we begin now."

"Are you sure about that?" Hikari looked doubtful. "We don't want to be stuck in the middle of nowhere in the dark."

"Myoume, what do you think?" Aoiketsu pushed the map towards the Seishi, eying her questioningly. "Do you concur?"

Myoume took the parchment, glancing at it as she pursed her lips. Gently she brushed her finger over the path that Aoiketsu had indicated. Then she shrugged, nodding her head.

"I don't see why it wouldn't be an option." She admitted. "This path is less well marked, but if Aoi is as skilful a map-reader as I think he is, we can probably manage it. It doesn't have a dangerous feel to it. I think we should try it. Anything to cut time off our journey."

"Then we better hurry breakfast." Shishi reflected. "If we're goin' to take a chance an' risk it, we should use as much of the day as we can, right?"

"It's all right, Hikari. You can ride with me again today, if you like." Aoiketsu cast his companion a glance, and Hikari shot him a rueful smile, nodding her head slowly.

"If you don't mind." She replied. "I guess it's that or be left behind."

"You're coming around to the idea of riding, huh, Hikari?" Myoume grinned at her, and Hikari shook her head.

"Not really." She admitted. "But I know Aoi won't let me fall off. So I guess... it'll be okay."

Shishi eyes widened at this, and her gaze flitted between the Kutou soldier and the schoolgirl with a growing look of incredulation on her features. Aoiketsu frowned.

"Something's wrong, Shishi?" He asked softly. Shishi stared at him, then she shook her head.

"Nothing." She said curtly. "I'm going to pack up my stuff ready to travel. I suggest you do the same."

With that she turned on her heel, heading back towards the corner of the grass that she had made her campsite the night before, and Aoiketsu's brows knitted together in bewilderment.

"Is she mad at me again?" He asked aloud, and Hikari sighed.

"I hope not." She admitted. "I thought last night... we'd settled this."

I'm sorry, Aoi. Maybe Shishi just doesn't like that you were doing the map-reading again. It was Jin's thing, after all... navigation."

"Then I'm sorry for it, but I must have some purpose in coming with you." Aoiketsu said evenly. "Else I put you all at risk for no reason, don't I?"

"We're already at risk, Aoi. I wouldn't worry about that." Myoume said frankly. "What we're doing is no safer than what you are, you know... nothing is guaranteed."

"Myoume's right." Hikari nodded. "And besides, you're not useless at all, Aoi. If we really can get to Choukou tonight, then we'll be not so very far from Yukigase and Tamatama-san's house. And we can find out from him about the mountain pass and get into Hokkan before we know it. That's all thanks to your map-reading... so don't let Shishi get you down."

Aoiketsu sent her a surprised glance, his eyes widening as he saw a faint pink blush rise in his companion's cheeks.

"Hikari?" He murmured, and the girl shook her head.

"I'm just glad you're smart enough to do it. That's all." She said quietly. "And that you did come with us."

For a moment Aoiketsu was struck speechless. Then he smiled, nodding his head.

"It's my pleasure." He said softly, and as he said it, he realised with a jolt how true his words were. Not only had he enjoyed the ride yesterday, but he was looking forward to riding with her again today. And, from her easy acceptance of his suggestion, he knew that no matter what she said, some of her dread of horses had been diminished by the previous day's journey. He swallowed hard, unsettled by the direction in which his thoughts were heading.

"I'm a spy. I'm a spy for Kutou and none of this is real." He told himself fiercely as he bent to gathering his own belongings. "Gaining the enemy's trust is important but I mustn't let myself get distracted. I'm here on a mission — I'm not here to make friends. The sooner I remember that, the easier it will be. No matter how nice Sukunami Hikari is to me, she's still from Kounan and she's still my enemy. And somehow... somehow... I have to find out what she knows and pass that information to Maichu in Choukou. Getting there in a day suits me better — the longer he's waiting there, the more risky his cover and the greater the chance of exposure. Focus, Aoi. Hyoushin-sama wouldn't be impressed if he knew how much your mind was straying

of late. This is for Kutou's sake — I mustn't get distracted, no matter what!"

"So they have departed."

Reizeitei turned to face his visitor, a faint, slightly wistful smile on his handsome features as he digested the news. Slowly he nodded his head. "I'm glad. With any luck this trip will be less tragic than the last."

"Yes. We all hope that." Chichiri sighed heavily, leaning against one of the large marble pillars that flanked the chamber as if he were at home in his farmstead and not within the Royal Palace in the company of Kounan's noble Emperor. "The truth is, Boushin-kun, that Jin's death has had some pretty deep shockwaves. In fact..."

He hesitated, and Reizeitei frowned, eying his companion keenly.

"In fact...?" He prompted. "Is there something amiss? Something I maybe should be aware of?"

"It's hard to say." Chichiri admitted. "I'm so used to talking to Tasuki straight away about anything like this... at least these days. I don't think there's a man alive who I've known so long as I've known him, or that I know so well. And normally his direct, no-nonsense way of handling things is refreshing. But he's taken Jin's death hard. And I worry a little about that."

"You think that perhaps he should be let alone to handle his grief before I or anyone else calls on him for Celestial aid?" Reizeitei asked softly. Chichiri considered this, then he shook his head.

"No." He said eventually. "No, that wouldn't suit Tasuki at all. It's more a case of a delicate matter which has come to my attention. Myoume first mentioned it to me, and having discussed it with her, I think... she's probably correct in her deductions. However... I'm not sure that it's a subject I should even bring before you, Heika. As Reizeitei-sama, I feel I shouldn't keep it from you. You are Kounan's Emperor and King, after all. But as Boushin..."

He faltered once again, and Reizeitei's clever gold eyes narrowed as he took in his companion's scarred, troubled features.

"Reizeitei's actions must often dictate Boushin's will. Even if I should like it to be otherwise." He said evenly. "I am Emperor, therefore if you feel as Emperor I should know, please, tell me. I will try and receive whatever news it is with impartiality and objectivity. As much so as any King can hope to do, I trust."

Chichiri was silent for a long while, and Reizeitei felt he was scrutinising the young Emperor, as if he were seeing shadows of something else in his bearing and demeanour. Finally he nodded.

“I sense Hotohori-sama’s aura more strongly in you when you say things like that.” He remarked at length. “And he would say the same. That it would be better he knew, even if it was information he didn’t like to hear. But Boushin-kun — before I do tell you, I would like to ask... that for now you do nothing about it. I want to trust Myoume’s instinct... to be honest, I want to trust in the boy myself.”

“Myoume’s instinct?” Reizeitei repeated, curiosity growing inside of him at this. “Boy? But... what boy? Chichiri, what are you talking about?”

“Kaiga Aoiketsu.” Chichiri said frankly.

“The Eastern boy?” Reizeitei’s eyes widened in surprise. “The exile that you and Shishi and Hikari rescued from the forestland near your village?”

“Yes. The same one.” Chichiri agreed.

“And he has done something amiss? Oh, but I thought he’d left with the others... am I then mistaken?”

“You’re not wrong, Heika. He did go with them.” Chichiri responded. “Which is why I’ve waited to come until now. I hope you’ll forgive me that. Just as I’m not sure how Tasuki will take it at the moment, your own reaction... I’m not sure of, either.”

“Reaction to what, exactly?” Reizeitei asked quietly, and Chichiri sighed.

“Myoume is fairly sure that Aoiketsu isn’t an exile or a refugee. Rather, she thinks that he’s a spy sent by Kutou’s court to keep an eye on us and to, most likely, discover the secret of our Shinzahou.” He said quietly.

Indignation flickered in the imperial gold eyes as Reizeitei digested this. Then he frowned.

“A spy?” He murmured. “Who you have sent on an important mission for Kounan’s sake... without informing anyone of your suspicions? That is unlike you, my friend. There must be a reason — will you tell me what it is?”

“Myoume and I both sense something else in the boy.” Chichiri admitted. “Something which, to me at least, is familiar. It’s the aura of the man who slew your father, Reizeitei-sama. Nakago, the Shougun

of Kutou.”

“Nakago...?” Reizeitei’s eyes almost fell out of his head at this. “Are you trying to tell me that that boy is Nakago?”

“Most likely his son, through means unknown.” Chichiri shook his head. “The lad is too old to be a reincarnated Seishi of any kind, yet the sense is unmistakable. That’s the true reason why I’ve kept it a secret until now. Because... truthfully, I didn’t know how you’d feel knowing that the son of that man was sheltering so close to Eiyuu and the palace.”

Reizeitei’s eyes became near slits as he considered the meaning behind his companion’s words.

“I think you rather like this Aoiketsu boy, even despite your suspicions.” He said softly. “Your evidence is damning indeed — yet you seek to protect him. Has this something to do with Myoume? Or something else?”

“Myoume believes Aoi’s coming to Kounan is not accidental, but she also believes he poses us little threat in his role as spy.” Chichiri spread his hands. “She’s certain that he won’t betray Hikari’s identity to his people... more, she thinks he’ll play a pivotal role in protecting them on this trip North. She was so convinced and so adamant that I decided it would be best to trust her. And take the gamble... let him go.”

“Hikari’s safety is of paramount importance to all of us.” Reizeitei nodded his head. “But even so, the son of *that man*...”

Hatred flickered briefly in his heart as he contemplated the long-dead Seiryuu Shougun and although he did his best to suppress it, he could not entirely keep the emotion from his eyes. Chichiri seemed to realise this, for he smiled, resting a gentle hand on the young man’s shoulder.

“You don’t need my advice these days, Koutei-sama, but I will give it anyway.” He said gently. “You are not Hotohori-sama. By the same token, Aoiketsu is not Nakago. Whether they share blood or not is immaterial — for Aoiketsu was orphaned not long after his birth. You lost your father before you came into this world at all. The two of you are of an age, both stripped of family by war. True, your families were on opposing sides. And Hotohori-sama wanted to bring Nakago down just as much as Nakago sought to kill Hotohori-sama. But this... this is peacetime. That is what we are trying to maintain. And besides, as you said, I like the boy. Aoiketsu is not his father’s son in all ways. Perhaps not in any — I don’t know, yet. But what I do know is that

he's a well-mannered, well-educated young man and his nature is prone to kindness and gentility. Not violence and hatred. Even if Myoume is right and he is a soldier masquerading as a noble son, he has that gentleness of nature born into him."

"Tell me fully what Myoume told to you, so that I might understand more clearly the situation." Reizeitei asked softly, and Chichiri nodded.

"Simply that Aoi's presence on the trip North is a vital one." He replied. "That he will somehow stand between Hikari and some unknown danger before they reach the North. More, Myoume seems certain that Nakago's son is Kounan's ally, not its enemy. Whatever Aoi thinks about it now — Myoume's certain that in the end he'll declare for Hikari and take her side."

"You have faith in her predictions?"

"Yes, I do."

"And Tasuki knows none of this yet?"

"No. Aoiketsu's connections to the man who slew Jin are tenuous and probably not all that intimate, but Tasuki's temper is volatile at present and I don't want to see him take off after them in order to do something rash." Chichiri sighed. "He was very fond of that boy, you know. In the absence of his own son, Jin was... well, like family to both him and Anzu."

"And, of course, to Shishi." Reizeitei became thoughtful. "We mustn't forget that Jin's death was something Myoume both predicted and sought to prevent. Equally she has had the same vision of destruction as Hikari... I believe you are probably right to trust her instinct. And you are also right to counsel me regarding my reaction. It is not seemly for an Emperor who pursues peace to be seen holding onto grudges from the past so plainly. My apologies, Chichiri. Whatever Boushin feels about Nakago, Reizeitei must not let it show."

"When there's just you and me here, Boushin-kun, you can act as you please." Chichiri's ruby eye twinkled with affection, and despite himself the Emperor returned the smile warmly, nodding his head.

"In my father's absence, I've always been glad of your guidance and advice." He agreed. "Even if I have never convinced you to come to court and take up an official role in matters here. But as always, you bring wise words to me. And I always need those. Yet you are never afraid to be honest to me — and few of my ministers are so frank."

"They're frightened by the robe of office, whereas to me, you're still

the young boy Hotohori-sama cared so much about protecting.” Chichiri smiled. “That’s all.”

“I confess it’s nicer to be called ‘Boushin’ sometimes, even if it’s not the done thing.” Reizeitei sighed. “I do wish, you know, that I could have taken Father’s sword and defended Hikari myself. I am not my father — I bear no mark of Suzaku. But my desire to protect my country and, especially, the treasure bestowed on it by Miaka-sama... I wish I had that chance.”

“Well, even Tasuki and I are unable to do much in that regard this time.” Chichiri reflected. “But with Miramu potentially in the area, we can’t risk leaving. If he can detect us — and if he’s a Seishi, he probably can — it’s just not an option.”

“Kounan is fortunate to still have the both of you.” Reizeitei said gravely. “And so am I.”

“So you will follow my lead as regards Aoiketsu?” The sorcerer gazed at him expectantly. “Was I right to trust to bring this to you after all, Heika?”

Reizeitei was silent for a moment. Then, slowly, he nodded his head.

“Yes, on both counts.” He agreed at length. “I will bow to you and to Toroki’s sight and trust that the boy will not cause us harm. In the end, I don’t want to create war with the East a second time. And much as I dislike the idea of spies operating within Kounan, if we are aware of them, then we can be more circumspect. Sometimes it is better to observe and learn than it is to act quickly with no recourse for back-up.”

“Without a doubt.” Chichiri agreed. “And you know, I think... I think that Aoiketsu may be doing just that himself. If he is a spy, then he’s a guileless one... he’s come into this country and he’s not found the hostile, anti-Eastern regime he expected to find. He’s young and idealistic — I don’t believe he’s thought about harming Kounan in any way in all this. His focus is on saving Kutou. And perhaps in the end ours is as well to some degree. At the very least we seek to prevent them causing us all massive amounts of damage. Perhaps in the end Aoiketsu will be the link between their land and ours.”

He shrugged.

“He seems already genuinely fond of Hikari, so I don’t think he’ll go out of his way to hurt her.” He added. “It remains to be seen whether Myoume’s right and that he becomes her protector instead. But either

way... for now I want to trust in him. In the fact that the children can do differently from the parents and that even if Nakago brought war, Aoiketsu can help to bring peace. Because at the end of the day, Heika, what kind of a world do we live in if all we do is repeat the same mistakes time and time again based on the same tired, incomprehensible reasons?"

Reizeitei eyed his companion for a moment, then he laughed.

"As I said, wise as ever." he said ruefully. "Yes, Chichiri, I have understood. And I will not act against Kutou's spies. To acknowledge their presence would be to insinuate Kutou were planning an assault on the South and it may yet come, if they truly seek our Shinzahou. But I will not be the antagonist. We will prepare, but we will do so carefully and cautiously. I will not fight where I do not have to. If your hopes come to anything, then with any luck a fight will be avoided."

"We all hope for that." Chichiri agreed.

Reizeitei cast a pensive glance across the chamber towards the window that divided him from the palace grounds.

"My advisors still wish me to take a wife, and I must soon buckle to their requests." He said softly. "Women from all over Kounan will come to the palace, just as they did in my father's time. If there is to be trouble, I do not wish to put the children of innocent families in such danger... as Emperor my own position may become threatened in the event of war. As my father was, I am trained to fight and would lead my own men if it was required of me. But I don't wish to leave Kounan and gamble the way he had to. So if you are right... if you believe that this Kaiga boy will not follow in his father's footsteps — I would prefer not to act. Whatever my personal feelings where Nakago is concerned. As you say, the father is not the child."

There was a faint note of wistfulness in his voice and Chichiri smiled, shaking his head slowly.

"The child cannot become the father, but he can surpass him." He said softly. "As parents, we all hope for the day we'll see our own children rise up and take a step further into the future than we could. You were Hotohori-sama's great hope and you have not disappointed him. Do not regret that you are not him, Boushin-kun. You have plenty enough qualities of your own which shine through. You are the son of a great Emperor — but you are not in his shadow."

"You're always so kind to me." Reizeitei said ruefully. "But maybe one day you'll be proven right. Father took so much into his stride and

had so much strength and determination, even to fight beyond death. You're right that to live up to him is difficult. Should I not even be attempting it?"

"Your father would tell you to be your own man, just as he was his own man." Chichiri advised. "Besides, Hotohori-sama had failings too. Weaknesses. Doubts. We all do... even those of us chosen by Suzaku. Your driving goal is to *maintain* peace for Kounan, not to bring it. Do you realise that that is a far more difficult thing to achieve? Breaking resistance and ending war is one thing. Making sure the people are content for a long period of time is the challenge. So far you have succeeded... and you will continue to succeed. I think you will surpass your father, Reizeitei-sama. And I think he'd be glad to see it."

"With your help, and Hikari, and the risks they've all taken so far." Reizeitei said evenly, and Chichiri nodded.

"Making a happy country is a team effort." He said lightly, his ruby eye twinkling with amusement. "I'm glad that you can accept the involvement of Kaiga Aoiketsu, even despite what we suspect. To be able to see beyond the immediate is a gift indeed. Perhaps that, in the end, is the difference between Kutou and Kounan."

"Do you think that Kutou's Emperor is a bad man? Or is he simply weak?" Reizeitei asked. Chichiri frowned.

"I don't know." He admitted. "Perhaps... neither one. I think maybe he's a desperate man, Heika. Sending a boy like Aoiketsu — a boy with Seiryuu's blood — so deep into enemy territory, and employing the assistance of one like Geiyo Miramu to do his bidding... yes, I think he is a very desperate man. But whether that makes him a good or a bad individual I couldn't tell you."

Reizeitei's expression became thoughtful.

"Then perhaps having an Easterner among us is a good thing in the end." He said slowly. "Perhaps we shall learn something too."

Chichiri chuckled.

"You think as I do." He agreed. "And it won't be the first time someone of Kutou's blood has acted for Kounan — I've still the memory of Amiboshi and how he defended Miaka's life with his own in Hokkan when we were separated. I think it's easier to make allies with honey and kindness than force them with barbs and threats, after all. Besides, I imagine that little by little Aoiketsu will reveal things that to him don't seem of much significance. Myoume will quickly pick up anything like that. Having her as an ally is a huge bonus for

Kounan, Heika. Despite her connection to the assassin, I trust in her word and her judgement.”

“Then I will also.” Reizeitei nodded. “And hope that, in some respects, Kutou’s spy can become a useful asset for Kounan after all.”

Chapter 7

Chapter Six

“It feels like we’ve been riding forever.”

Hikari let out a sigh, turning as much as she dared to glance up at her companion. “Aoi, you said we’d be in Choukou by sundown — right? But we’ve been riding for hours across this land and we still haven’t even seen the Shouryuu river we camped next to the last time we were in this region. Are you really sure we’re going to make it? It’s already starting to get dark on the horizon.”

“As sure as I can be, given the map we’ve got.” Aoiketsu nodded his head. “The river Shouryuu runs to the North of Choukou — it serves several towns in the area. We’re coming from the south — we won’t reach the river itself until we’ve passed through our destination. I’d be worried if we did see it, to be frank.”

“It doesn’t change Hiki’s point, though.” Shishi pointed out. “Aoi, the sun is beginning to go down. We can’t camp out here — it’s exposed.”

“We’re not going to.” Aoiketsu said calmly, gently reining in his steed as he slipped his reins into his left hand, gesturing to the east with his right. “Or can you not see what I can see? Look, Shishi — do you not see the ring of houses over that rise?”

“The boy’s right. There’s a town there all right.” Myoume guided her mare up alongside, following the soldier’s gesture, then nodding. “And at this time, they’re just beginning to light the lamps, so it’s easy to spot even as it does get darker. If we ride right along this path we should find ourselves right in the middle of it.”

“That’s Choukou?” Hikari squinted. “Thank goodness. I think my legs might drop off if I have to sit in this position much longer. I know riding is quicker, but I really, really don’t like it.”

“You’re less afraid of it today, though.” Aoiketsu cast her a grin. “Aren’t you? When we halted for lunch, you did not object to mounting the beast a second time. You are becoming accustomed to it, perhaps?”

“Well...” Hikari frowned, biting her lip, then she sighed. “I don’t know. Maybe. You... make me feel safer. I mean, not that Jin didn’t.

He did. But... you... what you said about befriending the horse, and you know, quelling its fears... helped. I didn't realise that it could be as scared of me as I am of it... and that I could affect it that way. So when I rode with Jin I... I guess he had a harder time keeping the animal under his control because I was so tense. I've tried not to be, with you. And I... I suppose it has been... easier."

She cast him a rueful smile, a faint pink tinge in her cheeks.

"You'd make a good riding teacher." She added. "I'm aching, but I guess I... I'm not so frightened any more. So long as... I'm riding with you."

"You can always ride with me." Aoiketsu assured her evenly. "So long as we travel this way. I have no objections to your company, and managing the horse is no more difficult with you than it would be otherwise."

"Bah." Shishi snorted. "This is all lovely, but we're not gettin' nearer the city itself. Are we sure that's even Choukou? It could be anywhere... none of us know the geography of this area well enough to really know."

"Aoi might. He *did* come from Hokkan." Hikari pointed out, and Shishi shook her head.

"I don't care." She said firmly.

"Not that it matters what town that is." Myoume observed. "A town is as good as any other when it comes to tired travellers, right? We can find an inn either way. And if it is Choukou, so much to the better."

"It is Choukou." Aoiketsu said softly. "There are no other towns on this direct path. I have plotted our course directly for that specific place — it is Choukou that we are heading towards."

"Well, you'll look like an idiot if you're wrong." Shishi said acerbically, kicking her horse into a canter as they began the ride over the rise and down towards the city that glittered beneath them in the advancing twilight.

"And if I am right, what then?" Aoiketsu returned mildly. Shishi just grimaced at him, and Myoume shook her head resignedly.

"Tiredness affects all of us." She murmured. "Shishi-chan, we've enemies enough without creating them among ourselves."

"I wasn't creating any enemies." Shishi shook her head. "I just don't like how sure he is. That's all. Like he couldn't possibly be wrong

about anything. That's an arrogant noble attitude and I hate it. I hate rich, stuck up people, and I hate exiled ones even more. Especially ones who can't even hold a blade."

With that she rode off in front, and Hikari sighed.

"She's been digging at you again all day long." She reflected. "I hate it. It doesn't make travelling any easier. Even if she is missing Jin..."

She trailed off, and Myoume sent her a reassuring smile.

"Shishi's more perceptive than maybe you realise she is." She said quietly. "I think she understands more than you've given her credit for, Hikari."

"Understands...?" Aoiketsu looked startled, as Hikari's eyes widened, and then her cheeks flushed red.

"What did you tell her?" She demanded, and Myoume shook her head.

"Nothing." She replied. "I told you. Shishi's more perceptive than that."

"Ugh." Hikari buried her head in her hands. "So you think... that she thinks... because you think..."

"What are we thinking, exactly?" Aoiketsu stared at her, completely flummoxed, and at his expression, Myoume laughed.

"I think it's a girl thing." She said wisely. "Don't worry about it right at the moment, Aoi-kun. I don't think Hikari is really ready to explain — and it might take a while, even if she did try."

It was impossible for Hikari to go any redder, and she shook her head hastily.

"It's definitely a girl thing." She said quickly. "It's nothing to do with you, so you shouldn't worry about it at all!"

"All... all right." Aoiketsu looked non-plussed, but he shrugged his shoulders. "If that's how it is."

"It is." Hikari said fervently. "And I'll talk to Shishi when we get to Choukou. We'll have plenty of time if we're staying the night. Although..."

She paused, eying her young guide doubtfully.

"Aoi-kun, do you mind us sharing a room or not?"

Aoiketsu's eyes widened in dismay, and Myoume looked amused.

"I think you offended his gentleman's sensibilities, Hikari." She said lightly. "Suggesting he wants to share a room with you so blatantly like that."

"That isn't what I mean!" Hikari's cheeks flushed again, reddening even further as she saw a faint colour touch Aoiketsu's cheeks too. "I just meant... when we were in Sairou... it was cheaper... and for safety..."

She trailed off, and Myoume chuckled.

"It seems that on the last journey, Hikari, Jin and Shishi took single rooms in some places so that Jin could better protect his companions from harm." She said quietly. "However, your situation is a little different. It's up to you how you feel about it — of course noone is questioning your honour or your integrity."

"I see." Aoiketsu's face resumed its normal colour, and he smiled, shaking his head. "Thank you for the translation. But... if it is no trouble... I am unaccustomed to sharing sleeping quarters with women. Even out in the open air it was... unusual for me to do so. I would not like... it does not seem proper... I shouldn't do it. I am a single, unmarried man of Kaiga blood, after all. I have to remember that before I act."

"Then you want your own room?" Hikari asked, having recovered herself sufficiently by this time to speak normally. Aoiketsu nodded.

"If it is no trouble." He repeated. "I would feel... uncomfortable... otherwise."

"Well, Chichiri said that Choukou is a town only just beginning to pick up on its luck, so prices there are still reasonably cheap." Myoume reflected. "That being the case, I think the money we have will probably stretch to it. My father gave me a little too, when we left Shouki-mura — as blood-gold for Jin's murder. Tasuki didn't want it, and Chichiri told me to take it with me — so I think we can manage that. Even if you don't have money of your own, Aoi."

"I have none." Aoiketsu said regretfully. "I had little to begin with and my skills are few... however what coins I had were lost in my journey here. So I am entirely reliant on your mercy — as ever."

"That's all right. For now, we're your protectors." Hikari smiled at him, and Aoiketsu nodded.

"So it would seem." He agreed gravely. "And we have reached our

destination. Shishi is waiting for us... she rides swiftly, despite her bad temper."

"Or because of it." Myoume mused. "Even so, this situation can't go on. I will speak to her too, I think... Tasuki charged me with her safety too and whether she likes it or not, I can't let her run riot ahead of us like that. She's too precious to too many people in Kounan to put herself so blatantly in danger. And I feel responsible for her — strong as she is, she's also still such a child. And if I can do anything to repay Tasuki for Jin's death and Chichiri for his unconditional kindness, then I'll do it by protecting their kin. So this evening we will be having words, too."

"Then I'll relish the chance of my own quarters a little more." Aoiketsu said ruefully, and Hikari grimaced.

"Lucky for you." She said with a sigh. "Shishi's a pain when she's in this kind of mood. Totally unreasonable and hot-headed and stupid. It's annoying."

"You took long enough."

As they joined their red-haired companion, Shishi shot them an impatient glance. "Aren't we going into this city?"

"That was the plan." Myoume said briskly. "And we need to find an inn with stabling for the horses. The poor animals must be exhausted too, you know — their stamina is exceptional, but even for mountain bandit steeds they're starting to lag."

She reached down to pat the grey mare's neck.

"It's not just us doing this journey, after all."

Aoiketsu scanned their surroundings thoughtfully, and then he nodded.

"May I make a suggestion, then?" He asked softly, and Shishi shot him a quizzical look.

"Another one? You're on a roll tonight."

"Perhaps." Aoiketsu ignored the sarcasm in his companion's voice. "It's just that I've heard that the most convenient place to stay in Choukou is an inn run by a family called Haku. I believe it's in the southern quarter, so it must not be too far beyond where we are now."

"Haku, huh?" Myoume eyed him keenly. "You have been to Choukou before, then?"

"No..." Aoiketsu hesitated, then shook his head. "No. But I have

travelled much and have absorbed information. It is only what I heard... but Choukou is, as you say, not a rich town. And it is probably the best we can do in the way of accomodation. I'm sure the prices will be acceptable."

"I don't care where we stay, so long as it has a bed and I can sleep." Hikari admitted. "I say we go with it and find this Haku family inn."

"Shishi?" Myoume cast the bandit a questioning glance, and Shishi shrugged.

"I'm tired too." She admitted. "It's fine with me."

She cast Aoiketsu a sidelong glance.

"Are you sharing a room with us, Aoi?"

"No." Aoiketsu said evenly. "I am not."

"Oh yes. I suppose noblemen don't do that kind of thing." Shishi pursed her lips. "Oh well. That suits me, too."

"And I think I see the place Aoi means." Hikari added. "At least... that looks like the character for 'sake'...am I right?"

She pointed across the uneven town landscape, and Myoume turned, nodding her head.

"That's it." She said, relief clear in her voice. "Above it I can see the character for 'Haku' painted across the front beams. Thank goodness. And just as the sun sets, too... Aoi, I have to admit, you were bang on with your map reading and your time estimate. We've saved a heck of a lot of time by arriving here a day early... thank you for that."

"As I said before, I have to be useful in whatever way I can, since I'm useless in other respects." Aoiketsu said frankly. Shishi eyed him for a moment, and her bronze eyes narrowed. She said nothing, however, merely tossing her head as she pressed her toes gently against her horse's flanks.

"We're going, then." She said firmly. "Come on. Before they have no rooms for the night."

As they rode closer to the inn, Hikari was aware of Aoiketsu's gaze scanning the ground, and she frowned, glancing up at him.

"Is something wrong?" She murmured.

"Nothing. Why do you ask?" Aoiketsu asked, startled.

"You seemed to be looking for something."

“More I was looking *at* something.” Aoiketsu shook his head, though there was a faint note of concern in his gentle Eastern tones. “I was wondering at the nature of people who use the ground as their writing paper.”

“Graffiti?” Hikari caught sight of the character, and frowned. “Is that... *spider*? Is that what that says?”

“It does.” Myoume’s voice became thoughtful, and Aoiketsu shook his head.

“Children do stupid things.” He said dismissively. “I am just astonished that the parents allow such acts. This is, after all, a public establishment.”

“What kind of weirdo would write on the ground like that anyway?” Shishi snorted. “Forget about it. We don’t need to know. Choukou’s a weird city — that goes without saying. You oughta hear Kashira an’ Chichiri on the subject of its past. Lets just be glad there’s an inn an’ that the people runnin’ it are alive an’ in control of their faculties — huh?”

“I don’t think I want to ask.” Hikari cast her friend a doubtful look, and Shishi shook her head.

“You don’t.” She said frankly. “So we’ll wait till we’ve left here for that story. For now, I’m starvin’ an’ I want somewhere to rest. Stop dawdlin’, okay? Let’s go.”

So they had arrived.

Maichu rested his hands on the sill of his window, gazing down pensively at the group of weary travellers below him. They had made good time, he realised — he himself had only reached Choukou that morning, and to see his friend so soon relieved him.

“Mind you, Aoi always was better at reading maps than most people. Doubtless he found a shorter path.” He reflected. “It’s ironic, really — he’s hurried their journey in order to meet with me here as soon as possible. But he’s also helped the South by doing it... I suppose it’s a fine line between duty and deception, at the end of the day.”

He bit his lip, his gaze flitting across the other members of the group. Two of the girls he did not recognise, but there was no mistaking the snow-white hair of the Byakko prophet, and inwardly he reminded himself to be careful.

“No kidding that she’s working for Suzaku, but even so, I don’t need her to see me and make any connections.” He reflected. “She may or may not be as much the prophet as she claims to be — but I won’t take chances. Hyoushin-sama and the Emperor are relying on me receiving information from this trip, and I won’t waste the chance.”

A faint smile touched his lips as he realised that Aoiketsu had both seen and interpreted his friend’s subtle message. In the dirt of the inn’s forecourt, he had sketched the character for spider, and he knew that his friend would have understood.

“He was the one who decided Maichu meant ‘dancing spider’, after all.” He remembered with a wry grin. “I might as well use it back on him. It’s a joke between Seiryuu’s soldiers — the Southerners won’t understand what it means. Even if they have seen it — it won’t make any sense. So he knows where I am... and if he’s just among young girls, he must be able to get away somehow. Even if one of them is Toroki.”

He turned away from the window, sitting down on his bed as he reached for his boots.

“I guess I should do the noble contact thing and head down to the bar for something to drink.” He reflected ruefully. “After all, spying is thirsty work. An’ I haven’t seen Aoi in a few days. It’s weird, bein’ here on my own. With Kayu gone, it’s strange. Noone suspects me, but I still feel like I’m bein’ watched. Even though I know it’s my imagination. Sooner this mission is done, the better. We can rejoin our people, an’ get the plaudits for a job well done. I’m a soldier — I don’t think I like being a spy. Still, with Aoi’s heritage... I imagine he’s better at it than me. Certainly from what Kayu said... I’m sure of it. An’ I bet he’s having no trouble pullin’ off the court noble act. He always has been different from the rest of us in some way or other, after all.”

He sat back against the wall, as his memory was drawn back to the first time he had entered the palace of Kutou. It had been that day that he had first made Aoiketsu’s acquaintance, and from the minute he had seen the young boy fight, he had known that they would be friends for life.

“Because he was different, but he didn’t behave like people should treat him different.” He murmured. “Shit, I didn’t think about it so much then. But of late, bein’ on my own like this — an’ thinkin’ on what Kayu said... I suppose it’s somethin’ I’ve always known. If anyone can pull off this business, it’s Aoi. An’ yet, despite that... I’d

rather we were the both of us still trainin' in Kutou. War or no war..."

He closed his eyes.

"That's why I went to the palace in the first place. Why I went to the capital." He added, as his memories washed over him once more. "To be a soldier."

So he was really going to be a soldier.

Maichu glanced around him, eyes bright with excitement as he took in the elegance of the palace walls, and then, in the distance, the tall, stern stone structure that he knew from his cousin's descriptions must be the military barracks. He clenched his fists together, fighting the urge to let out a whoop of joy. At last he was going to get away from the horrible, lingering smell of the tanner's workshop and the monotony of being stumbled over as each of his parents carried out their daily business. He wasn't cut out for provincial life, this he knew. He was born to wield a blade, just like Kisha had before him.

And now he was going to get his chance.

He had not been the only recruit brought in on this carriage train, he realised, as he glanced around him at the other milling young men. But he was by far and away the youngest, and he realised with a flicker of smug pride that it had been the skills Kisha had taught him that had allowed him to be selected even though he had only just passed his twelfth birthday. They would not miss him, he knew that without feeling bitter or resentful over it. Bitterness had never been one of his characteristics, and nor was regret — he was merely eager to face this new experience and learn all he could about the glories of war.

"Shi Maichu."

A voice called out his name, and as he was pushed forwards he jerked to attention, attempting a salute as he scanned the gathered people for the speaker. Unnoticed by the young boy, a newcomer had joined the group, dressed in the smart, glittering armour of Kutou's royal guard, and as Maichu gazed at him, his dark eyes widened with surprise. This man was like nothing else he had ever seen before, for he was almost as pale as the moon, with long silver hair flowing in a tail behind his head, and vivid, piercing amethyst eyes that seemed to miss nothing. It was not lost on the startled Maichu that at his approach, many of the sharp spoken men who had accompanied them down had fallen silent, bowing heads or saluting in respect, and Maichu realised that this oddity was of some importance.

"You are Shi Maichu?" The apparition rested his gaze on the young boy now, and Maichu nodded, swallowing hard as he struggled to find his

voice.

“Yes sir.” He managed at length. “I’m Shi Maichu, sir.”

“I see.” The man’s eyes narrowed slightly, and then he nodded. “Very well. Come with me, Shi Maichu.”

“Y... yes sir.” Maichu was startled, but he nodded his head again, his fingers tightening around his meagre pack of belongings as he obediently followed the silver-haired figure across the cobbles towards the wooden side-gate that lead across to the military barracks. Until they were past this point, his guide did not stop, or pause to look at him. However, once they were out of the range of the other guards, the ghost-man turned, eying Maichu pensively.

“You are how old, Shi Maichu?”

“Twelve summers, sir.” Maichu responded. “But I... I’ll work really hard, I promise. I know I’m younger than most of the others but I... please don’t send me back home, sir. I want to be a soldier — I want to fight for the Emperor of Kutou!”

“Do you, now?” Something flickered faintly in the apparition’s clever eyes, and Maichu faltered, unsure how to proceed. Then the other man nodded.

“My name is Tou Hyoushin.” He said softly, in perfectly formed Kutou dialect that seemed somehow at odds with the uniqueness of his appearance. “I am the Emperor’s bodyguard, and from hereon in, I will be both your Commander and your sensei. Do you understand, Shi Maichu? Being a soldier is not a game. You truly will have to work very hard — your life will belong to your country and you will be bound to obey the orders I give you — orders that may be sanctioned by the Emperor himself. Do you think that you can accept that, to no longer be able to do entirely as you please?”

“I want to be a soldier.” Maichu said earnestly. “My cousin Kisha fought for Kutou and... and I want to be just like him.”

“Shi Kisha...” Hyoushin’s eyes narrowed, and the faintest of smiles twitched at his lips. “I believe I once knew a gallant soldier by that name. One who took severe injury in the Emperor’s name... so you are of his blood, then, Shi Maichu?”

“Yes sir.” Maichu’s eyes shone with pride as he nodded his head. “He’s my cousin.”

“Then I will expect similar courage from you.” Hyoushin reflected. “Twelve is young, but I find that youth is not an obstacle to training. You

have the passion which is more important... and besides, you are not the youngest member of the Imperial guard."

For the briefest moment, the amethyst eyes softened, and Maichu realised that a good heart beat behind the cold, icy exterior.

"A boy of twelve is old enough to make a decision like this for himself." The Commander added. "I would not have had you here, if it had been only your parents' will you be here. But it is clearly your own, Shi Maichu. And that being the case... you are as welcome as the others. Follow me... I will show you to your quarters."

"Yes, sir." Maichu managed another clumsy salute. "Please, sir — did you say I wasn't the youngest? There's someone younger than me?"

"Of the same age, in fact." Hyoushin inclined his head slightly, as they reached the entrance to the barracks, the guards on duty saluting the pale-skinned officer as they passed through into the building itself. "Which is why I am glad of your coming here. It is always good to form bonds among soldiers when they are young. And Aoiketsu has been training with me since he was five years old. There is very little he will not know about life here — he will be able to guide you in those things much more readily than I — and I have much to do in any case."

"Aoiketsu." Maichu murmured the odd name, then, "Wow, since he was five? Really?"

"Yes." Hyoushin agreed. "He is quite a capable young swordsman."

At that moment they reached a narrow corridor, and at the end of it, Hyoushin paused, reaching out to rap his knuckles on the furthestmost wooden door.

"Aoiketsu!" He called, and there was the sound of a scramble within, then the door was flung back as a bright-eyed young boy of Maichu's age saluted his commander sharply, his gaze flickering over the newcomer with interest. Hyoushin gestured to the boy to relax his stance, and immediately the youngster did so, a quizzical look in his odd blue eyes.

"Aoiketsu, this is Shi Maichu." Hyoushin said briskly. "A fresh recruit. I am charging you with his initiation. You are of an age, and he will share your quarters here. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Hyoushin-sama." Aoiketsu nodded his head. He offered Maichu a smile. "You're twelve summers? Like me?"

"Yes." Maichu agreed, and Aoiketsu's smile widened.

"Good." He said with a sigh. "Because I'm sick of being the youngest."

"I will leave you to show Maichu where things are, and to instruct him on drill." Hyoushin said evenly. "I will see you both tomorrow morning, at dawn."

With that he was gone, and the two boys were left to eye one another curiously.

"I guess you oughta come in." Aoiketsu said at length. "If you're gonna bunk with me an' all. I mean, it's better than being shoved in with someone older who's gonna try telling me what to do. I hate that."

"Okay." Maichu nodded, doing as he was bidden. "Hey, your name is... Aoiketsu, right?"

"Yes." Aoiketsu agreed. "Kaiga Aoiketsu."

"Kaiga?" Maichu's eyes widened. "Like that noble family who were wiped out during the war with Kounan?"

"They were my family." Aoiketsu looked surprised. "How do you know that? Noone ever talks about it and it happened before I was born."

"My cousin fought for the Emperor." Maichu said proudly. "An' he told me lots of stories. Wow... so you're some real rich kid, huh?"

"Not really." Aoiketsu shook his head, thick dark hair falling over his shoulder as he did so, and Maichu was struck by how much like a young girl his new roommate looked. "I'm an orphan. I mean, I was born here. My mother came to the Emperor for help, when it all happened. And when she died, I kind of stayed here. But there's no Kaiga estate or anything. I don't have any money. I'm just gonna be a soldier. Like you are."

"That Hyoushin guy said you'd been with him since you were five." Maichu remembered. Aoiketsu nodded.

"He's my sensei." He agreed. "And the Commander. Everyone respects Hyoushin-sama... you will too."

"He looks... so weird." Maichu admitted. "Like he's made of china or something."

"He's a Meihi." Aoiketsu frowned, and Maichu wondered at the sudden solemnity in his new acquaintance's odd blue eyes. "We don't talk about it. Not ever. He was a slave, you see. And it was... it was my Papa's estate... that he was a slave on. So... we don't talk about it. But he's from the Meihi tribe. He's the only one from that day who... who wasn't killed. Just him and... well, my mother."

"That sucks." Maichu frowned. "Your family must've been hell a mean if that's the case."

"I guess." Aoiketsu shrugged. "I don't know."

"Guess you don't." Maichu acknowledged ruefully. "Sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

"It's okay." Aoiketsu shook his head. "I don't know anything about them, really. And I never knew any of them. All I know is that my mother claimed sanctuary from the Emperor and she asked him to make sure I was raised to be a soldier in the Imperial guard, so that no matter what I'd have a future. So that's what happened. And it's okay. I like it. I want to be a soldier — like Hyoushin-sama."

"You really look up to this guy, huh?" Maichu asked, and Aoiketsu nodded.

"Like I said, everyone does." He agreed. "You'll understand, when you've been here longer."

He dropped down on his bunk, indicating for his companion to occupy the bare one opposite.

"Your family name is Shi." He added. "Right?"

"Yes." Maichu nodded.

"Are you related to Shi Kisha? You said you had a cousin who fought for Kintsusei-sama... was that him?"

"You know Kisha?" Maichu was taken aback, and Aoiketsu nodded his head.

"He was here with Hyoushin-sama when I first came to train." He agreed. "But he lost a hand in battle, and he couldn't fight any more. Didn't he?"

"Not his whole hand." Maichu shook his head. "Four of the fingers, though — he can't hold a sword in his right hand any more. But he taught me some things... and now I'm gonna get to use them. I always wanted to be a soldier like him... for the Emperor."

"Kintsusei-sama's a kind man." Aoiketsu reflected, in such a way that made Maichu realise at some point in his young life his new acquaintance had been on familiar terms with the current King of Kutou. "He let me stay here, even when Mother died. He's always been good to me. I always think that, if I die fighting for him, it will be okay. Because he's done so much to help me, even though my father's family were so horrible to everyone."

"You've met the Emperor?" Maichu murmured, and Aoiketsu nodded.

"Of course." He agreed, sounding surprised. "Although I don't see him often now. Hyoushin-sama is mostly the one I see... or the tutors at the

palace annexe.”

“Tutors?” Maichu’s brows furrowed, and Aoiketsu grimaced.

“I have to learn to read and write properly. And other stuff, too.” He said wearily. “Because Mother made them promise, before she died, that all those things... that I’d be taught stuff. She wanted me to be educated — I guess because I’m a Kaiga, and they have such a long history and all that. So I am. Some of it’s boring... and it means I’m always busy. Today’s the first day in ages that I’ve not had something to do, because Hyoushin-sama has been busy with the new conscripts, and my tutors are in session with the Emperor over something political. But I have to study maths and astrology and Chinese and all kinds of political stuff. Hyoushin-sama said it will make me a better soldier, to understand as much as I can about Kutou. But to me it sometimes seems a pain.”

He eyed his new acquaintance quizzically.

“Do you read and write?”

“Not really.” Maichu shook his head. “My parents don’t really care much about it, and I was always going to be a soldier. Father promised, because he knew that if I could do that, he wouldn’t need to worry about me and all of that. And a soldier doesn’t need to read and write — not really. Kisha doesn’t much, either. Just his name and a few other things. But I can’t even really do that... it’s never seemed important.”

“You can’t even write your name?” Aoiketsu looked startled, and for the first time in his life Maichu wondered if maybe his illiteracy was truly a short-coming. He shook his head again.

“Really?”

“Really.” Maichu agreed. “Do you think it matters?”

“I guess that’s up to Hyoushin-sama.” Aoiketsu’s brow furrowed. “But all the others I’ve trained with could at least do that. They knew how to write their names, and read them, because of taking orders and stuff. Hyoushin-sama is pretty hot on his men being as knowledgeable as possible, and some of the others I’ve trained with have come from noble families in the provinces. They can already read complicated stuff when they come here.”

“I see.” Maichu grimaced. “You think that means I’m gonna be stuck learnin’ this stuff too?”

“You can come to class with me.” Aoiketsu offered. “It would be less boring, if you did, and I could ask Hyoushin-sama. He listens to me... besides, we’re the same age, and the Commander always says that he won’t

throw a man into battle until he's at least fifteen summers. The Emperor fought for Kutou at that age, so that's the threshold. You and me, we won't see active battle for another three years yet. So I guess he'll say there's time. Besides..."

He paused, then shrugged his shoulders.

"I want to be high-ranking in the Imperial Guard one day." He admitted self-consciously. "Maybe even sit the examinations and become a court official. Because I want to do my best for the Emperor and the Commander and prove that not all Kaigas are bastard traitors."

"Shit." Maichu murmured. "You're thinkin' about all that stuff... right now?"

"I've spent my whole life here." Aoiketsu agreed. "So I suppose so. What about you? What does your family do, Maichu?"

"They're tanners." Maichu pulled a face. "It's a stinking trade an' I'm glad to be away from the stench, to be honest. Not much happens where we live. There are no rebels. No bandits. Nothin' interesting goes on and my Ma nags the hell out of me when there's chores to be done. I want some excitement — that's why I came here."

Aoiketsu grinned.

"All right." He said frankly, reaching out to grab his companion by the arm as he pulled him forcibly out of the chamber and along the hallway. "Come with me."

"Hey! At least give me some choice in the matter, will you?" Maichu objected, though his new ally took no notice of his protests, merely speeding up as they passed through halls and corridors towards an unknown destination. "Aoiketsu... stop it!"

"It's Aoi." As they reached a wooden door, Aoiketsu suddenly stopped, turning to offer his companion a grin.

"Huh?" Maichu stared at him, and Aoiketsu shrugged.

"My name." He explained, turning the handle and pushing the door open. "Aoiketsu's too long, really. My mother chose it, and Hyoushin-sama always uses it. But everyone else calls me Aoi. So you can too. Since we're going to be rooming together."

"All right." Maichu's face cleared and he nodded. "Aoi is easier to remember anyhow."

He glanced around him.

"Where are we now?"

"The training hall." Aoiketsu led him inside, pushing the door shut with a bang behind them. "Noone else is here now, because they're all busy with other chores an' errands. So we're here on our own."

"What about you? Don't you do chores an' errands?" Maichu demanded, and Aoiketsu laughed, nodding his head.

"Sure I do." He agreed, his strange blue eyes dancing as he surveyed his new friend. "Right now, you're it."

"I'm it?"

"You're my errand. Hyoushin-sama's orders. I'm to initiate you. Right?" Aoiketsu shrugged. "Might as well have fun doing it."

He pulled back a set of sliding dividers, pulling out two sturdy wooden sticks as he tossed one in his companion's direction. "Here. Take this."

"Woah." Maichu reached out a hand, just about catching the weapon in his outstretched grip. "You want to fight me?"

"Just to see what you can do. That's all." Aoiketsu agreed. "Well? Are you game?"

Maichu eyed the stick for a moment, then he grinned, nodding his head.

"Bring it on." He agreed. "I'm ready when you are."

As their mock-battle began, Maichu realised that there had been no idle bragging in the Meihi Commander's assertion of Aoiketsu's fighting skill. Despite his own rough training with his cousin, he was soon outclassed by his young companion's deft, swift moves, and he found his stick sent flying across the chamber as he struggled to evade his opponent. As the blunt end of Aoiketsu's stick pressed down against his throat, pushing him against the floor, he felt a flare of respect rise up inside of him.

"Shit." He murmured. "You may look like a girl, but you sure as hell don't fight like one!"

"Do you yield?" Aoiketsu did not withdraw the stick, and Maichu nodded, holding up his hands.

"Yes, I yield. Like I got a choice." He replied, and Aoiketsu grinned, pulling back his weapon and glancing at it approvingly.

"You ain't bad, considering you've done no proper training." He reflected. "It took me a few shots to disarm you."

"Hyoushin-sama said that you were good with a sword." Maichu scrambled into a sitting position, reaching for his stick. "Guess he wasn't exaggerating."

“He never does.” Aoiketsu said solemnly. “He always says the truth. If you do something well, he’ll tell you so — but he’ll never say it unless it’s true. Besides, I’m not that good — not compared to him. Hyoushin-sama fights with his left arm... everyone says that’s why it’s so hard to disarm him. It’s really hard to learn to fight that way — but he does it as if he’s done it all his life.”

“His left arm? Really?” Maichu stared, and Aoiketsu nodded.

“Yes.” He agreed. “You must’ve seen that he wears his sword on the other side of his belt from normal. And even the most experienced soldiers have never managed to take the blade from his grasp during training fights.”

“Guess that’s why he’s Commander, then.” Maichu realised. “I ain’t ever seen anyone fight left-handed before.”

“Well, when you see Hyoushin-sama in action, you’ll understand.” Aoiketsu grinned. “They say he can decapitate a traitor with one swing of his blade... I don’t know if it’s true, but I wouldn’t be surprised. He’s the kind of soldier I want to be like — one day. When I’m grown. Even though I’m right-handed — I’ll do my best.”

He reached out a hand, hauling Maichu to his feet.

“Do you want another round?” He asked innocently. “That was just a warm-up, after all.”

Maichu eyed him doubtfully, and Aoiketsu laughed.

“They’re just sticks. I’m not going to kill you.” He said frankly. “Not with this thing.”

“I guess, but I can still bruise.” Maichu rubbed his back ruefully. “You hit damn hard, you know, for a play fight.”

“You learn pretty quickly not to challenge Aoi-kun when he’s on his mettle.”

A fresh voice from the doorway made both boys turn, a grin touching Aoiketsu’s lips as he saluted playfully.

“Maru-niisan! When did you get back to base?”

“This morning, but I think we’ll be leaving again this evening, or tomorrow.” The older soldier offered the young boy a grin, coming across to pat him on the shoulder. “You’re bleeding a newcomer, I see — will you introduce me?”

“For sure.” Aoiketsu nodded. “Maru-nii, this is Shi Maichu. He’s one of the conscripts, only he’s twelve like me. Hyoushin-sama’s assigned me to

induct him, so I'm trying. And Maichu, this is Koku Maru. He's one of the Imperial Guard — he's helped train us when he's been stationed here — although he's been fighting for the Emperor in the southern provinces for the last few weeks."

He cast the older soldier a quizzical look.

"Did you win?"

"Well, we secured one of the towns, but I and a few others were sent back here for reinforcements. And to convey a message to his Highness." Maru replied. "As I said, it's not over yet. We quelled the rebellion there, but lost enough of our own in the process. Still, I think we have the upper hand. As soon as I've spoken to Kintsusei-sama, I'll know whether we're going back right away or not. I trust we will — I don't want to run out on our forces when it's such a critical time."

"It's really rough in the south, huh?" Maichu's eyes grew big as he listened. "You're really fighting a proper war, aren't you, Maru-san?"

"Yes, we are." Maru agreed. "But you boys don't need to worry about that kind of action just yet. Even if you are good enough to beat several of the men in my division, Aoi-kun — do your best and teach this fresh blood some of your tricks, okay? Then, by the time you both get to your first battle, they'll run away screaming in fear at your skill."

"I'll do my best." Aoiketsu shone at the praise, and Maichu eyed him pensively.

"You really are some whizkid hotshot, aren't you?" He asked, and Maru laughed.

"Some of the old soldiers I've fought with have likened him to the Shougun, in his aptitude and style." He admitted, as Aoiketsu reddened. "I don't know about that, but he's sure a quick learner. Stick with him, Maichu — those gentle looks of his are deceptive... as I guess you've already found out once today."

"He's not as green as some." Aoiketsu recovered himself. "I think he'll be a good fighter, Maru-nii. He's strong, for twelve."

"Just like you." Maru ran affectionate fingers through the young boy's dark hair. "All right. Behave yourselves, the pair of you. No doubt, when I return from the border provinces, we'll cross paths again. I'll look forward to seeing how you've improved, Shi Maichu. In Aoiketsu's company, and under Hyoushin-sama's guidance, I'm sure you can only get stronger."

He winked.

"We'll speak again, when I get back." He added. "Take care of

yourselves, and don't let anyone catch you with your guard down!"

With that he was gone, and Aoiketsu tapped his stick pensively against the floor.

"Maru-nii was one of Hyoushin-sama's recruits, when I was first transferred for training." He reflected. "He's a good soldier, Maichu... but he's right about the fighting in the south. A lot of people have already died there... it makes me more determined to train hard so that one day I can do something to help too. Besides..."

He pursed his lips, eying the stick thoughtfully.

"I had to learn to fight back pretty quickly." He admitted. "Because when you're the youngest, everyone rips on you some. That's just how it is... because I was little and I didn't know anything about fighting. But now I can beat most of the other boys, so they don't pick on me any more."

"I bet they don't." Maichu muttered. "Not if you bruise them up good an' proper. They'd have to be damn suicidal."

Aoiketsu looked rueful, shaking his head.

"I'm not as strong as all that." He said sadly. "I can fight... I mean, I'm not bad at that. But..."

He faltered, sighing heavily, and Maichu frowned.

"But what?" He asked.

"I hope one day I will be strong enough to go out there and fight under Kutou's banner." Aoiketsu admitted. "It's what I want — to be like Maru-nii and Hyoushin-sama and defend my Emperor properly. I train as hard as I can because I want to be that way. But... even if I train forever... I might not ever be able to fight."

"Why not?" Maichu looked confused. "You fight like hell already, an' you're no older than me. By the time you're fifteen, surely the Commander'll have you in the midst of it."

"No. He won't." Aoiketsu said pragmatically, shaking his head. "Not even close. He won't consider it, no matter how good I am."

He swung his stick around, holding it up before him.

"Are we going again?" He asked. "If you shift your hold a little more firmly up the stick, you'll keep your grip better. When it's a proper sword, you won't be able to grab it like that -that's why I was able to disarm you so easily before. Even if you haven't learnt a specific style yet, you can learn to hold the thing more securely."

“All right.” Maichu shifted his grasp, eying his companion keenly. “But I still don’t understand why you wouldn’t be in the thick of battle.”

“It doesn’t matter right now.” Aoiketsu shook his head. “Just concentrate, okay? I’m not going to go easy on you.”

Before Maichu could react, his spitfire companion had come at him again, and it was all he could do to bring his weapon up in time to deflect the blow. Somehow he managed to swing a shot or two in Aoiketsu’s direction, noticing as he did so that the change in grasp had indeed made his grip firmer, and he made an inward note of his new friend’s advice as he sought to keep up with the boy’s feinting, easy style.

Before long, however, Aoiketsu had knocked the weapon aside once more, pushing him back against the wall of the chamber, and he sighed, holding up his hands.

“I give.” He said resignedly. “You got me again.”

“You were better that time.” Aoiketsu lowered his stick. “You’ll be a lot better really quickly, you know, because you listen and you do as people advise you. If you do that, you’ll learn a lot really fast.”

“You were right, about my grip. I’ll remember that.” Maichu glanced down at his hands, frowning as he registered the red taint of blood across his raw knuckles. “Shit, you sure as hell don’t take it easy, though. Whatever you say about your fighting style, Aoi — you’re dangerous to be with. Am I safe, sharing quarters with you?”

“Don’t be stupid.” Aoiketsu scolded. “Pick up your stick and don’t be a wuss. It’s too late for best of three, but it never hurts.”

“Three?” Maichu demanded. “What, you want to make my other hand bleed too? Or are you gonna break my fingers for me this time? You’ve got the message across, Aoi, loud and clear. What are you... Aoi?”

For as he had brandished his bloody fist in his companion’s face, the boy had suddenly turned very pale, taking a step back away from him. “Shit, what’s the matter with you? You’ve gone white as a sheet.”

“Nothing.” Aoiketsu swallowed. “I just... nothing.”

He closed his eyes, turning away and from the whiteness of his knuckles, Maichu had the impression he was gripping on to the stick in his hand as if by doing so he could keep a hold of his composure.

“You look like you’re gonna puke.” He said bluntly. “I didn’t think I even landed a hit on you — what’s up?”

“I’m all right.” Aoiketsu swallowed again, shaking his head. “Really.”

“Like hell you are.” Maichu frowned, reaching out to take his new friend by the shoulder, and as he did so, Aoiketsu let out an exclamation, shoving the blooded arm away with a distressed look in his blue eyes.

“Don’t.” He begged. “Please. Just... don’t.”

Maichu stared at him for a moment. Then, as he glanced down at his hand, his eyes widened.

“Shit.” He murmured. “Aoi... are you... afraid of blood?”

“Shut up.” Aoiketsu muttered. “I’m not afraid of anything. It’s not that. I’m not scared.”

“But you’re friggin’ pale as a ghost because I waved my hand in your face.” Maichu murmured. “Dammit, that’s what you meant — about not bein’ on the field of battle. You’re one hell of a fighter already, Aoi — but you can’t stand blood. Can you? Just this little bit has made you sick to your stomach... how the hell are you ever gonna be deployed in a proper war if you can’t stand the sight of blood?”

Aoiketsu sighed, sinking down against the wall as he buried his head in his hands.

“I don’t know.” He admitted, his voice muffled. “That’s why I keep training so hard as I do. Because... eventually... Hyoushin-sama says that if I work hard enough, I’ll conquer it. I just... I haven’t, so far. And it sucks. It really sucks. Because I want... I want to be useful to them. But right now I’m nothing but a waste of their time.”

He glanced up, eying Maichu hopelessly.

“Yet they still persevere with me. They haven’t given up.” He added softly. “Which just makes me feel even worse about it. Because I really can’t help it, Maichu. It’s not that I’m scared. I just... it’s an automatic reaction. I’ve always done it, even before I came here to train. From when I was really really small. And because of that, I don’t know how to control it.”

He sighed, glancing at his hands.

“So you’ll be a better soldier than me, when you’ve learnt a while longer.” He concluded. “Because you ain’t as stupid as me.”

“Shit. That’s messed up.” Maichu shook his head slowly, and Aoiketsu snorted derisively.

“Do you know the worst thing about it?” He asked bitterly. “My name. My name is the worst bit.”

“Your name?” Maichu looked blank, and Aoiketsu nodded. Deftly he

brushed the characters for his name in the dust on the floor.

“Kaiga Aoiketsu.” He said slowly. “Do you know what Aoiketsu means?”

“Not a clue.” Maichu shook his head, and Aoiketsu grimaced.

“Blue blood.” he whispered. “That’s what it damn well means. The wretched character for blood is even in my name — and yet I still can’t get over it.”

“Now that really is messed up.” Maichu squinted at the writing, then he shrugged. “Oh well. You teach me to fight like you, and I’ll batter the wussiness out of you in return. Okay?”

“Huh?” Aoiketsu stared, and Maichu grinned, scooping up his stick and tapping Aoiketsu lightly on the shoulder with it.

“Fair is fair.” He said evenly. “You teach me to fight. I’ll teach you not to be such a girl. Is it a deal? After all, we’re bunk mates now. So we should stick together. Right?”

“I guess.” Aoiketsu admitted, and Maichu’s grin widened.

“Besides, I feel better knowing you have some weakness. Fightin’ like that, you’re kinda intimidatin’ otherwise.” He admitted. “So it’s a deal. I’ll kick it outta you sooner or later... consider it a promise!”

“I guess that’s a promise I still need to keep.” Maichu opened his eyes, amusement in his expression as he nodded his head. “But even so, Aoi, I have faith in you to find out what we need to know. Hyoushin-sama does too. And hopefully if you’ve been travelling with them, you must’ve learnt something useful to us. If you saw my signal, then you know I’m here. I’ll go downstairs and wait for you... you know me well enough to know where to find me, after all. After six years sharing a room, it should be clear enough. I guess that’s why Kayu was happy for me to stay behind, in the end. I do know you better... this way, with any luck, it’ll be more seamless.”

He finished fastening his boots, getting to his feet.

“Southern alcohol is good.” He reflected. “Better than the cheap rubbish we get in the East. And noone said that we couldn’t enjoy ourselves a little, while we were here. Spying is a thirsty job, after all — and since wenches are seriously off-limits, I have to take what I can get.”

He pulled open the door of his chamber, a smile touching his features.

“Don’t take too long, Aoi-kun.” He murmured. “I’ll be waiting, but the longer you are, the more time I’ll have to drink... and I’d like to be able to remember what you tell me!”

Along the corridor, had Maichu but known it less than a handful of rooms from his own chamber, his Eastern friend was relishing the chance to be alone for the first time since their journey north had begun. As he had requested, he had a room to himself, and though it was little more than a box in terms of size, Aoiketsu found he was grateful for small mercies.

“This way I can slip out to meet Maichu.” He murmured. “I must be right about this place. That the spider is his calling card. There’s no other reason... good thing I noticed that before we settled on somewhere to stay the night. It would be suspicious if I left the inn to go somewhere else, but it would have been worse if someone had sent me a message to tell me where he’d be. I’m glad he’s resourceful enough to think of a solution — even though the others saw it, there’s no way in hell they’d understand that it was a message from my best friend. After all, I’ve not even mentioned Maichu to them — so even Myoume couldn’t make the connection.”

He flopped back on his bed, slipping his hands behind his head as he gazed pensively up at the ceiling.

“It seems like this is the first time it’s been quiet since we set out.” He mused. “It would be easier if Shishi wasn’t always going at me, too. She has no idea that I hate speaking so formally as much as she hates hearing it. It’s a pain — it just makes me far more conscious of what I’m saying. But I have to keep it up. This is who I am, after all. Kaiga Aoiketsu... I have to keep that in mind all of the time. Otherwise...”

He bit his lip, shaking his head.

“I’m sure that Reizeitei-sama wouldn’t be amused if he knew what I really was.” He concluded. “No matter what Shishi says, I have to stick with it.”

He sighed, as another face flickered through his thoughts, and despite himself a pang of guilt touched his heart.

“The one I really hate lying to is Hikari.” He admitted. “What’s wrong with me? She’s the daughter of Tamahome... the enemy of Kutou. The man who killed the Shougun... who... who may have been my father. But she... she’s been so kind to me. And... I... I don’t like how this makes me feel.”

He pulled himself into a sitting position, resting his chin in his hands as he contemplated.

“I’m not a liar by nature.” he realised. “Maybe that’s it. Lying is difficult, even when its for your country’s sake. All my memories, all my thoughts... I have to keep track of everything I say so that noone doubts who I am. But doing that is deceiving Hikari as well as Shishi and Myoume. And whilst I don’t feel so worried about them... it really does bother me that Hikari trusts me. Even though I’m not someone she should trust. Oh, hell, what is wrong with me? I’m here on Hyoushin-sama’s mission — on the Emperor’s orders. They’re more important people to me, right? And if I mess up now, it might not just be my life but Maichu’s that’s in trouble. He’s my best friend, and I won’t put him in a difficult position. But dammit, I hate this. I hate misleading someone who believes me so easily. If she wasn’t so kind — if she was more of an enemy — I wouldn’t care. But she’s been nice to me from the start. And she said we were friends.”

He buried his head in his hands.

“Spying is complicated.” He realised. “I’m not sure I’m cut out for it. Maybe I’m not hardened enough. If I could lie like Miramu — or dismiss people — it would be easier. But I’m not like him, dammit. And all this stuff about my father is bugging me too. Ever since Chichiri mentioned Nakago’s blue eyes. It’s crazy, surely... but dammit, what if it isn’t crazy? What if that really is who I am? It just makes things all the more complicated.”

He sighed, getting to his feet.

“I suppose Maichu must know I’m here by now.” he reflected. “And I should go and find him. If I know the guy the way I think I do, there’s only one place he’d be in an inn like this, and I should seek him out before he drinks himself silly.”

He unlocked the catch on the chamber door, pushing it back, but as he did so he let out an exclamation, realising that someone was waiting for him outside.

“Shishi!”

“Did I frighten you, wimp boy?” Shishi asked softly, and at the dark look in her expression, Aoiketsu took a step back, eying her in confusion.

“What are you doing here?” He asked evenly. “I was going to take a walk in the moonlight — I thought we’d retired for the night, and I was restless.”

"I don't care what you do." Shishi shook her head, pushing him back into the room proper as she shut the door with a click behind her. "I've come to talk to you an' you can damn well listen. All right?"

"All right." Aoiketsu's brows knitted together in bewilderment, but he nodded. "What's the matter?"

"What's the matter." Shishi glowered. "Are you really so stupid that you don't know? Or is it me you think is stupid, huh?"

"Shishi, I don't understand what you're here to say, but..."

"Then shut up and listen." Shishi cut across him, putting her hands on her hips. "An' listen good. You might think you're some high-born, exiled Kutou blue-blood and that that makes you special... but it doesn't, all right? An' I won't have a wimp like you messin' around with Hiki's brain. Do you understand? I know what you're about, an' it's pissin' me off."

"What I'm about?" Aoiketsu paled despite himself. "What... what do you mean?"

"Hiki." Shishi's eyes narrowed. "Don't think that jus' because I'm the youngest, an' that you're older than me, I don't understand what's goin' on. An' it's sickenin' to watch, so I've had enough of it."

"Enough of... what, precisely?"

"Dammit, stop it!" Shishi exclaimed, bringing her hand clean across Aoiketsu's cheek and despite himself the soldier flinched, his fingers going to his skin in surprise.

"Shishi?"

"Take this in, or next time I'll be making the point on the end of my sword." Shishi said darkly. "You're an outsider. You're a wimp. You're just in the way. An' Hiki's far too good for the likes of you. So whatever sly things you're thinkin' about seducin' her attentions, give it up now. I ain't an idiot an' I've seen the way you've both been actin' since you turned up in the forest. And I won't stand for it. I won't see Jin trampled over like that, dammit... so get that into your head."

"Seducing... her... attentions?" Aoiketsu's eyes opened wide with astonishment, although relief flooded through his heart as he realised his cover had not been blown. "Shishi, what kind of a man do you think I am? I simply..."

"You simply get in the way." Shishi said coldly. "I can put up with you bein' an idiot. With the fact you're weak an' useless an' even that you're a friggin' bookworm know it all. But my brother sacrificed his

life to protect Hikari. He loved her. Do you understand that? Jin was in love with Hiki. An' I won't take someone like you tryin' to muscle in on his place. Ridin' with her, sweet talkin' her... I hate it. So stop it. All right? She's far too important for the likes of you."

Aoiketsu gathered his wits, shooting his companion an even look.

"Jin has passed on, tragically." He said quietly. "And you are obviously still suffering from that event. But there's nothing of that nature between Hikari and I. Besides, I was not aware that Jin and Hikari were involved in that regard. I have simply tried to be as useful as I can to you people, in order to repay you for taking me in. That is all."

"Jin-*san* to you." Shishi snapped. "And no, I didn't say that. Jin an' Hiki — it wasn't like that."

"Then I don't understand what you're talking about at all." Aoiketsu said flatly. "And I'm tired. Please, leave me alone... I'd like to sleep."

"What about the moonlit walk?" Shishi threw back at him, and Aoiketsu sighed, rubbing his temples.

"You are giving me a headache." He said sadly. "Listen, Shishi. I'm sorry for your brother's death. But I cannot change it. Nor have I tried to make any kind of advance towards Hikari of the nature you mean. It would be foolish — we are both of us in too precarious a situation, in any case."

"So you *do* have feelings for her!" Shishi pounced, and Aoiketsu groaned.

"I didn't say that!" He exclaimed. "Stop it, please!"

"*You* stop it." Shishi shook her head. "You stop playing up to her. All right? You've no business doing so, especially when you barely know who she is."

"I know she's someone with a kind heart." Aoiketsu said quietly. "She hasn't objected to my overtures of friendship, so you have no reason to. I told you — there is nothing of any other nature between Hikari and I. You are mistaken."

"I'm not an idiot." Shishi shook her head impatiently. "Even if you won't admit it, I know it's there. And I won't stand for it. Not when Jin... I won't. So unless you want to meet the sharp end of my sword, Aoi, you do as I say an' stop it. All right?"

"I think it's up to Hikari who she befriends. Not up to you."

"I promised myself that I'd take on Jin's job an' protect her, after he died." Shishi said coldly. "An' I meant it. So it is my business. More so than yours. You're from Kutou. You don't even follow Suzaku's interests. Hiki an' me, we're both Seishi-born. An' that makes it different. So you'd do well to remember that. Sleep on it an' think it over. I've had enough of your company for the one night."

With that she turned on her heel, stalking out of the chamber and banging the door hard behind her.

For a moment Aoiketsu just stared after her. Then he bit his lip, slowly shaking his head.

"What was all of *that* in aid of?" He murmured. "Hikari and I... does she really think so? But... it's impossible! Hikari is... and I'm..."

He closed his eyes, gathering his composure as he did so.

"I'm a spy. It's all make-believe." He muttered. "And I've always said that I'll leave women alone until Kutou has its peace. I'm a proper soldier — Kutou's will is all that matters to me. Why would Shishi think that I'd be interested in Hikari in any way other than as friends? Even as that, it's risky. Honestly, that girl is deluded."

But as he got to his feet, he felt a faint flicker of something strange stirring in his heart. He frowned, glancing at his reflection in the mirror.

"Only an idiot would want to spend time with this weak, stupid fool I've been acting." He added. "Shishi's crazy. And I'm getting distracted by mad female whims yet again. I need to get to grips with this. Maichu's probably waiting for me... and the sooner I make report to him the better. As for what Shishi said — I'd do best forgetting it."

His eyes narrowed.

"Besides, if she *did* decide to challenge me with her sword, she might get a surprise." He added. "Even if it gave away my cover — I won't die over something so stupid as a mountain girl's deluded fancy. She'll find out what it's like to fight a real soldier of the Kutou Imperial Guard... so maybe *she's* the one who should be watching her step!"

Chapter 8

Chapter Seven

“Where do you suppose Shishi went?”

As Hikari set her bag down beside the bed with a sigh, she cast Myoume a quizzical glance, sinking down onto the heavy covers as she did so. “I thought she was tired — I thought we all were. And it’s late — we’ve eaten and I thought we were going to head to bed. Why has she hared off like this all of a sudden? We’re meant to be sticking together.”

“I imagine she’s gone to speak to our other travel companion.” Myoume perched on the far end of the bed, crossing her legs as she considered Hikari’s question. Hikari’s eyes opened wide in surprise.

“Aoi? But she doesn’t even like him much — why would she?”

“Well, I might be well off base.” Myoume reflected. “But it’s like I said before. Shishi’s not a fool. And she has that mountain instinct to protect — I think she’s probably gone to see him on your behalf. Likely to tell him to keep his distance — or else.”

“To keep his distance?” Hikari echoed, her cheeks pinkening as she absorbed the meaning in the prophet’s words. “But... you really think that... Shishi thinks that... I’m... with Aoi? So much so that she’d go... yell at him about it?”

“Definitely.” Myoume sighed, stretching her arms over her head. “Besides, she’s not so very far wrong, Hikari-chan, is she? You more or less said it yourself that you liked him... didn’t you?”

“I told you. It’s complicated.” Hikari said slowly, shaking her head in frustration. “I don’t belong in this world — and even if I did, we’ve got far too much to do without me worrying about that.”

“But even though you say that, it’s not entirely how you feel, is it?”

“I don’t really want to talk about how I feel.” Hikari admitted, flopping back against the pillows as she let out a sigh. “I don’t really understand it enough to even try beginning. It would be nuts to even think about it. Besides, Jin died to make sure I didn’t — to make sure I was alive to help save Kounan. That’s the reason I’m here — for his sake, I can’t get distracted.”

Myoume was silent for a moment. Then she shrugged her shoulders.

“All right.” She said evenly. “If that’s what you want, I won’t mention it any further.”

“Thank you.” Hikari looked relieved. “But if Shishi has gone to talk to Aoi — I should go find her, and stop her, shouldn’t I?”

She reddened as she imagined the kind of conversation that the forceful, tactless young bandit might have initiated.

“Before I can’t face him at all, I need to stop her.” She repeated. “I can’t let him think I’m some lovesick idiot who has random crushes on guys I’ve only known a matter of a couple of weeks. Just because I’m adolescent doesn’t mean I want him to think I’m a flake. And even if I... even if I do like him, somehow — it’s a crazy, passing thought that he doesn’t need to know about.”

“In which case, going after Shishi will only confirm what she says, surely? Not negate it.” Myoume said wisely. “If Shishi jumps to a conclusion off her own bat, and you say nothing about it, Aoi’s far less likely to think there’s any truth in it — don’t you think so?”

“You might be right.” Hikari admitted. “But even so... Shishi’s pretty direct and to the point when she wants to be. And I hate to think what she’s said. I told you — the whole thing is crazy. I don’t even understand the things I’m feeling myself. Aoi’s handsome, true, and he’s gentle and he’s kind. But I’ve never been drawn to anyone before — not like this. Even Jin, who I trusted with my life... I was so close to Jin, somehow, but I didn’t feel the same way. He was... he was like my brother, my friend, my comrade... all those things. But... somehow... even though I’m not so close to Aoi yet, and even though I don’t think I know him so well as I came to know Jin — I feel... different.”

Myoume’s indigo eyes twinkled with amusement.

“I’m a great believer in fate.” She said frankly. “And I don’t think you should worry about this quite so much as you are, Hikari-chan. I think you and Aoi were meant to meet. I think that’s why he was in Kounan at all — in fact, I could even say that his meeting you was a vital event in our quest.”

“Really?” Hikari looked doubtful. “I don’t see how. You’re trying to make me feel better, but I don’t think it’s as simple as that. I’m not even from this world, after all.”

“While you’re here, you are.” Myoume told her. “You’re Suzaku no Shinzahou and that’s something you can’t be in your own world.

Didn't you realise that yet? That you don't have those same powers when you're in the Priestess's world. That's why your father had to relinquish his identity as Tamahome to stay with your mother. You're a girl of both worlds, Hikari — of that one and of this one. And besides, your mother fell in love with your father, didn't she? Two different worlds, yet she still did."

"I know she did, and people sometimes say I'm like her." Hikari admitted. "But even so..."

She sighed, rubbing her temples.

"When I was here to begin with, even though I was slowly realising that I was in a real place, not a story world... it didn't totally sink in." She confessed. "It was almost surreal, somehow — that none of it was truly happening, and that maybe, in some deep part of my mind, I thought I might wake up at any moment and discover it was a dream. But then... but then Jin died, and I realised... I suppose I saw for the first time how real this world was. That it wasn't simply a world in a book, even though it appeared that way. The people here — everything here — is as real as I am. And since I knew that — since I came back — I've felt differently. Everything has been much more serious, and I've been more determined. Because Jin died, I finally know that the situation here is real. But I still feel bad that he died and I couldn't do anything to stop it. Being close to me in this world is dangerous, and when I was home, Mother told me about her time here — about how many friends she lost fighting for Kounan. It frightens me that the same could happen now. I'm her daughter. Jin's already sacrificed himself to save me. I would hate it if... if I was close to other people who died fighting for me too. Do you know what I mean?"

"I do." Myoume looked solemn. "As a Seishi, my duty is to die in Byakko's name, if it's required of me... so I probably understand better than anyone. I'm glad you realise that this world is real, now — that everything is serious and that you're as focused as you are on saving it. But sometimes there are other ways to save worlds than simply fighting and dying. Jin's sacrifice was a tragedy. But it was not in vain. We've pushed on and he'd be glad... don't you think so? And I'm sure that Aoi's presence isn't a coincidence. You and he were meant to meet — I don't think you should fight too hard against that. It may be Suzaku's will, or it may be Seiryuu's, even. But I'm sure there's a divine force behind it... even if I can't be sure of which one."

"Seiryuu?" Hikari looked surprised, and Myoume smiled.

"Aoiketsu is from Kutou." She reminded her. "And Seiryuu watches

over all who were born in the East — remember?”

“Oh yes.” Hikari sighed. “I suppose I’ve begun thinking of Seiryuu as some kind of enemy, but that’s not the case, is it?”

“No, Seiryuu is not your enemy — Seiryuu is noone’s enemy.” Myoume shook her head. “The Gods only become tainted by the will and actions of the people... they don’t truly seek conflict of their own volition, you know. And even though Aoi is here, away from his homeland — I’m sure Seiryuu still has an interest in him, regardless.”

“I suppose I need to learn a lot more about these Gods.” Hikari decided slowly. “Especially if I’m going to understand my own power. Since I came back here, it hasn’t risen inside of me once. Not since I used the *shinken* to return to the Eastern Village. I know it’s there. It’s like I’m conscious of it flickering in the background all the time, now. But I can’t reach it. I can’t voluntarily connect to it. It’s a little scary, to tell you the truth.”

“Suzaku is the God of love.” Myoume said gently. “I don’t think he intends to hurt you, Hikari-chan.”

“Maybe not.” Hikari acknowledged. “But it’s like having a time bomb strapped to your head. At any minute it could flare up. I’m Suzaku’s puppet and I can’t control it. It’s annoying. Maybe if I had been able to do that, I would have been able to save Jin. Even though Chichiri’s tried to teach me, all I’ve become able to do is sense his chi and Tasuki’s, when they’re near enough in range. I really am proving useless, even though I’m determined not to be. Maybe that’s why I like Aoi so much as I do — because in a sense, he’s like that too.”

“But Aoi isn’t useless at all. And nor are you.” Myoume said lightly. “So you shouldn’t take that attitude. I have a lot of faith in you, Sukunami Hikari. I wouldn’t have left my hermit’s cave for anyone else.”

“That kind of pressure really doesn’t help.” Hikari grimaced, and Myoume laughed.

“Don’t worry so much.” She advised. “Leave that to me — it’s my job, after all. Just follow your heart and your instincts, Hikari-chan. All right?”

Hikari gazed at her companion for a moment, but before she could answer, the door of the bedroom flew open and their missing companion stalked in, flame-red hair flying loose around her face in a veritable lion’s mane as she cast her friend a dark glare.

“Now for you.” She said, by way of preamble, shutting the door

with a rather too firm click as she advanced on the startled Hikari. “What the hell are you playing at, you idiot? What kind of a game do you think this journey is, anyway?”

“Shishi?” Hikari found her voice, staring at the young bandit as if she’d lost her mind. “What the...?”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know.” Shishi said in low tones. “I’ve spoken to him and now I’m speaking to you. You didn’t even complain about getting on the horse with Aoi this morning, and I’ve seen the way you look when he’s talking to you, or when he does something you think is cool. For Suzaku’s sake get a goddamn grip on yourself, will you? This ain’t why we’re here, and I’m sick of bein’ stuck in the middle of it!”

“Shishi, calm down.” Myoume said softly. “You’re shouting and there’s no reason for it.”

“There’s a damn reason all right.” Shishi said coldly. “You keep out of it — this doesn’t concern you.”

“Shishi, shut up.” Hikari gathered her wits, anger sparking in her own hazel eyes. “I have no idea what you said to Aoi, but dammit, it doesn’t concern *you* either. Besides, there’s nothing between Aoi and I, so you’re hallucinating. You get a grip on yourself, okay? You’re being stupid. No, more than stupid. You’re being childish and jumping to conclusions.”

“So I’m childish, huh?” Shishi’s eyes glittered dangerously. “Let me tell you something then, in case it hadn’t sunk into your brain properly. Jin died to protect you. Have you forgotten that? You’re not enough of an idiot not to know why he did that... right? Jin was in love with you. Why, I don’t know. But he was. And this is how you repay him — flirtin’ and acting coy with some weird wuss from the East?”

“Shishi...” Hikari faltered, her anger fading as she absorbed the genuine hurt in Shishi’s eyes. She shook her head.

“No, it’s not like that.” She said quietly. “I know that Jin gave his life for me. I know how he felt about me. And I... I regret it. I won’t lie to you — I’m attracted to Aoi. I don’t know why, but I am. It’s nothing to do with Jin, though. And I... I know too well what we’re here to do, so I wasn’t... I haven’t... said anything to him about it. I wasn’t going to, even if it was the case. Because what Jin died to do is more important than that. And that’s why I’m here. To make sure Kounan is safe, and that Jin didn’t die in vain.”

“Except, of course, now Shishi’s rather blown the secret by charging in where she wasn’t invited.” Myoume said reflectively. “Shishi-chan, you really need to learn some tact... or at least some self-restraint. Even if you are defending your brother’s memory... sometimes there are better ways of handling it.”

“But...”

Despite herself, Shishi faltered, staring at Myoume as if the wind had been taken completely out of her sails. Myoume laughed.

“Now the whole issue is out in the open.” She added. “Shishi-chan, will you listen to me a moment? Even if you think it’s none of my business. Because I think... for Jin’s sake... you need to.”

“For... Jin’s sake?” Shishi blinked. “I don’t understand.”

“Jin made a choice in Sairou.” Myoume said gently. “He didn’t know that Aoiketsu would come to Kounan, or that he’d wind up travelling with us. Equally, Aoi didn’t know that Jin was going to die and make you and Hikari so upset. These things are entirely unconnected with one another. Jin shouldn’t be used as a reason to hurt Aoi — Aoi is not here to spite Jin’s memory.”

“But I...”

“I haven’t finished yet.” Myoume held up her hand, shaking her head slightly, and despite herself, Shishi hesitated. “Jin’s choice was simple. That he loved Hikari was not a part of the equation. He didn’t die because he loved her. He didn’t sacrifice everything he had because of that. He did it because Kounan needed him to. There’s the difference — the thing you’re not understanding. Perhaps its more that you can’t understand feeling that way... I don’t know for sure. But Chichiri, Tasuki — I think they do. The way both of them have reacted — I think they, like me, see it in the same light. Jin’s death was a sacrifice in Suzaku’s name. It was the kind of sacrifice Shichi Seishi are born to make. Jin wasn’t a Seishi. But he was raised by one, with the values and integrity that told him what he should do. In that light, Shishi, Jin acted as Suzaku no Miko’s own protectors once acted. To save Kounan, Suzaku no Miko must survive. And this time, to save everything, Suzaku no Shinzahu must, too. That was Jin’s line of thought. His own affection for Hikari wasn’t a part of the equation. He simply did what he had to do.”

“Mother said that when Nuriko died, it was like that.” Hikari said slowly. “That she and he were very close, but that Nuriko... he made a decision he had to make for Kounan’s sake. And Jin... that it sounded to her like Jin did the same thing.”

“He did.” Myoume agreed. “And more, Shishi — Jin did not seek Hikari’s love in return. You do know that, I think? He knew she was from another world. And that it was never going to be an option. When he died, he didn’t die with the hope that she would be tied to him or his death for the rest of her life. He died so that she might live. Do you realise the full scope of that? To live is to experience everything. Including love. He knew that Hikari didn’t feel that way about him. He was all right with that fact. He did his duty by her anyway. And Hikari is still here. She’s still alive, and still fighting for Kounan. If she has feelings for Aoi, it’s no slight on Jin’s memory. Jin was a smart young man and I’m sure he knew that by taking himself out of the equation, there may well be another. He understood better than you do, I think, just what it was he was doing.”

Shishi bit her lip, tears glittering in her bronze eyes.

“But he shouldn’t have.” She whispered. “And I can’t believe... Jin... he wouldn’t... that guy is a wimp and an idiot and he’s not even half the man that Jin was. Why does it have to be someone like him, Myoume? Someone like that who survived against your brother, and now someone who’s muscling in on our journey, and... Hiki, I don’t understand it. Why do you like him so much... why is it that way?”

“Shishi...” Hikari slipped an arm around her friend’s shoulders. “I’m sorry. I am, okay? I didn’t mean it. And like I said, I haven’t... I won’t... because we have too much to do. But I can’t help it. I trusted Jin with everything. But he was like a brother, not anything else. I loved him a lot, even in the short time we knew one another. But it was a different kind of love. I... I guess I don’t really understand a lot about love anyway, because before I left my world I thought I liked someone in my class there. But this feeling... I don’t think I’ve ever had this feeling before. It’s like something’s drawing me towards Aoi no matter what I do. Like it was...”

“Fate?” Myoume suggested, as Hikari faltered, searching for the right word. She shrugged.

“I don’t know.”

“Well, then I’ll tell you what I think.” Myoume smiled. “Before you were born, and before Aoi was born, it was predetermined that one day you would meet. I didn’t know each of you by name, then — but I understand the connection a little more clearly now. And Shishi, I promise you, Aoiketsu is neither a wimp nor an idiot. He’s a very smart, well educated young man and he is an asset, not a burden. Of course he’s not Jin. But you’re the only one trying to make a comparison. Neither Hikari or I think of Aoi as Jin’s replacement. We

both see him as a new acquaintance. And Hikari's entitled to like that acquaintance, just as you're allowed to dislike him."

She winked at Hikari.

"I told you, don't fight it." She added. "There's nothing wrong with feeling the way you do. Don't let Shishi's reservations influence you in the end. You and Aoi have a connection that stems from before either one of you were born, I told you. I can't explain it any more clearly right at the moment... but I think it has something to do with what I said before. About Suzaku and Seiryuu and the actions of the Gods."

"Seiryuu wouldn't choose a guy like that to be his representative." Shishi muttered. "Seiryuu's the God of fighting, after all."

"There are many ways to fight." Myoume said lightly. "Shishi, can you accept what I've said? For Jin's sake, as much as for Hikari's own? What would he say, to see you so upset? What would he feel, if he knew he'd caused you to react this way? Jin loved Hikari but I believe he loved you more. Do you think he'd be happy and at peace, to see you like this?"

Shishi's eyes opened wide with dismay, and Hikari reached across to squeeze the younger girl's hand.

"I'm sorry." She repeated. "I wasn't trying to get you cross."

Shishi swallowed hard. Then she sighed.

"No. Guess it's me." She admitted heavily. "An' maybe I shouldn't have gone off at him, either... even if I think he's a weed, I should'a left well alone. But you're right — Myoume, you're right. About Jin. He'd be pissed off at the whole thing... I know he would. An' I don't want that. Even if I'm still a little mad at him for dyin' like he did — I still don't want him stuck in some spiritual limbo or whatever because I'm losin' my temper an' lashin' out."

"Then it's all all right." Myoume got to her feet. "I'll let you two talk it out for a little while longer. I'm going to take a walk — it's a clear night and I have some things I'd like to consider on my own for a while, if you don't mind. Your auras are both prickling with all kinds of things at the moment, and I need a little space to focus."

"Sure. Sorry." Hikari looked rueful, and Myoume shrugged.

"That's what happens when you get involved with people." She said with a grin. "In some ways I've missed it — but I'm used to solitude and sometimes I do need to take some time away. I won't be long, I'm sure... try not to kill one another, all right?"

“All right.” Shishi said sheepishly. “We’ll see you soon, Myoume. And... thanks, I... I guess.”

Myoume merely smiled at her, inclining her head in acknowledgement. Then she was gone, and the two teenagers faced one another awkwardly. For a moment there was silence, then Shishi sighed.

“Okaa-san says I’m like Papa that way.” She said resignedly. “I barrel right on in... but I guess I should’a thought about it first.”

“Maybe.” Hikari frowned. “Truth is, Shishi, I’m not really sure what I feel about anything at the moment. I do... I like Aoi. I know that much. And if Myoume says it’s because we’re connected, I guess I can’t help it. But I don’t want to insult Jin’s ghost, or hurt you, or any of that. And we have a job to do. Besides, I’m from the other world. Even if I did try and pursue anything with anyone here, in the end my heart would just be messed up. So I wasn’t going to say anything to him at all.”

“Well, he knows somethin’ about it now.” Shishi grimaced, rubbing her temples. “Sorry.”

“I guess it’s all right. I mean, I’m sorry too.”

“It ain’t just Jin, I s’pose.” Shishi admitted, raising her gaze to meet Hikari’s with an uncharacteristically serious expression in the bright bronze eyes. “It’s you as well.”

“Me?” Hikari looked startled, and Shishi nodded.

“When Jin died was the worst thing I ever had to face.” She said solemnly. “An’ you took off on me. Left me on my own. If it wasn’t for Myoume... I don’t know if I’d’ve got home or anythin’. I wasn’t thinking right. But since then... I was worried you wouldn’t come back. An’ worse than that, now, I... I guess... I already lost Jin. But I don’t like bein’ on my own. An’ I don’t want... to lose you as well, I s’pose.”

Hikari’s eyes widened, and Shishi glanced down.

“You’ve been spendin’ a lot of time with Aoi.” She added. “An’ I was... maybe... jealous about it. Because... you an’ me are friends. An’ I don’t often make friends with someone like this — but these days, you... I trust you. An’ you an’ me are a team. Except now he’s here. An’ I don’t know what to do about it.”

Hikari bit her lip. Then she shuffled across towards her friend, hugging her tightly.

“You’re stupid.” She said softly. “Of course we’re friends. You shouldn’t be jealous of anything.”

“Guess not.” Shishi pinkened, looking rueful. “I ain’t never had a friend who was a girl before. That’s all. It’s odd but... cool, too. An’ I didn’t like it, when you went home. I was jealous of that girl you have there, too — Arina, or whatever her name is. I guess this is somethin’ of a pattern with me, or somethin’. I really ain’t as strong as I think.”

“Well, you can stop feeling that way.” Hikari held her at arm’s length. “No matter how many strange guys I get crushes on, I promise that we’re still friends. But you do realise, Shishi, at the end of all of this...”

“You’ll go back to your world. Right.” Shishi sighed, running her fingers through her thick red hair. “But I ain’t thinking about that right at the moment. Goin’ back to the mountain by myself ain’t really appealin’. It makes me feel like a real kid, but that’s the truth. Without Jin, it’s too odd, bein’ there. Papa an’ Okaa-san are different too, an’ even if they come to terms with it all, it’ll still be... odd.”

“But you have friends on the mountain.” Hikari objected, and Shishi shook her head.

“I’m Kashira’s cub, so noone messes with me.” She replied. “Even though I can kick most of their asses — that’s the other reason they won’t bother me too much. Noone’s bad to me or nothin’. But I’m still a girl, Hiki. An’ even though they respect me, I still... ain’t like the others. Jin was different, an’ because o’ him, I was pretty much okay with some o’ the other guys. But he’s not there now. An’ I’m... on my own. I took it for granted, what he did for me — an’ I wish I’d understood it before. So comin’ out like this is fine — you don’t treat me as just a girl, an’ you have faith in my abilities. You need my help to protect you, too.”

She sighed, sitting back against the wall.

“Remember when we were in Kahou, an’ you said that I was a different kind o’ friend because I didn’t care about appearances an’ shit like your friends back home?” She asked. Hikari nodded, nonplussed.

“I remember.” She agreed. “What about it?”

Shishi smiled wryly.

“Guess it’s the same way for me.” She replied. “I mean, you’re a different kind of friend for me because you don’t care how strong I am. I mean, if I cried... you wouldn’t care. You wouldn’t call me a

wimp or tell me to get over myself. I hate cryin', but since Jin died, I've found myself doin' it more'n I'd like. But it's hard to cry on the mountain. I haveta work so damn hard to get them to take me seriously, an' I don't want them to see me as just some girl. Thing is, you're a girl too. An' that shit don't make a difference to you. I can... talk to you. I guess that's it. So that's why I don't want Aoi... gettin' in the way."

"Then he won't." Hikari said firmly. "You were the first person I met in this world, Shishi. And it was you who brought me back here, remember? Your nagging me to come. Even if Myoume's right and Aoi and I are connected — you and I are too. And so long as we're on this quest, you don't need to worry about that changing. We're a team, even if Jin isn't still here to make up the numbers. Myoume and Aoi are new friends — but you and me are the core of this whole thing. Suzaku's people. Right?"

Shishi gazed at her for a moment. Then she nodded her head.

"Right." She murmured, and Hikari could see a mixture of relief and gratitude in the bronze eyes. "Suzaku's people. For Kounan's sake. You and me."

Hikari grinned.

"Then we're okay?"

"Yeah. We're okay."

"And you're not going to pick on Aoi any more?"

"I... guess not." Shishi pursed her lips. "Much. Unless he does somethin' really stupid. Because whatever Myoume says, Hiki, he's still an idiot."

"A nice kind of idiot, though. And he can read maps."

"Hiki..."

"I know, I know. There isn't time for it." Hikari shook her head, and Shishi frowned, resting a hand on her arm.

"Myoume's right." She said, shaking her head. "Jin would want you to be happy more than anything else. Besides, I've put the cat among the pigeons now, haven't I? Bringin' the subject out for all to see. An' if it worked that way — I guess it'd be all right. Thing is, you say there's no time but... Hiki, at the end of this, you're goin' home. There'll be no time then, either. An' so... if that's how you feel... I... I'll stop causin' you trouble over it. I mean, so long as I know you ain't gonna edge me outta things..."

“Shishi, you’re my number one guardian, I promise.” Hikari dimpled. “But I don’t know — it’s a complicated situation and for now I’m tired. I need to sleep. Whatever you said to him... we can talk about it in the morning. Okay? And see what happens then. Myoume’ll be back soon, anyhow... probably.”

“It must be pissin’ her off like crazy, y’know, stoppin’ with us like this after so long on her own.” Shishi reflected. “Didn’t her mother say that she moved to the mountain to be away from people?”

“Yes.” Hikari agreed. “Although I think the Shinzahou made it worse. But maybe you’re right. Still, she did say she liked it — so I guess we just have to go with that. I’m glad she’s with us, Shishi. I feel safer, somehow, knowing she’s here and that if Miramu showed up, she’d know.”

“Yeah. Me too.” Shishi nodded. “She was real good to me after Jin died — she an’ her family, in Shouki. Kashira told me before we left that she was someone we should trust... that he an’ Chichiri had discussed it an’ that they both thought so.”

“Do you think she’s as powerful as Tasuki or Chichiri is?”

“Dunno.” Shishi admitted. “She is just a guardian for the Shinzahou, not a Miko’s protector. But... we haven’t really seen her use her power much, have we? So it’s hard to be sure.”

“I guess.” Hikari acknowledged. “Oh well. So long as it’s equal to Miramu’s, I guess it doesn’t matter either way. We’ll just have to trust in her, I suppose.”

“Well, lets face it. We can’t rely on Aoi for protection.” Shishi said wryly, and Hikari laughed.

“Possibly not. But that’s okay.” She reflected. “We’ve you and Myoume for that, and Aoi can stick to the maps. And maybe I’ll find something I can do too, before this is over. I mean, for Suzaku. This time. Noone’s going to die this time around — no matter what happens. I won’t let it.”

“Me neither.” Shishi said soberly. “All right. Enough of this. We should get some sleep an’ take advantage of the fact we’ve got beds to sleep in, rather than the ground. Tomorrow we’ll probably be headin’ off again — so shut up talkin’ to me, okay? I’m tired too, you know.”

“Okay.” Hikari sent her an amused grin, nodding her head. “Good night, Shishi. Sweet dreams, huh?”

“You too.” Shishi agreed. “An’ tomorrow we’ll get the jump on

those Easterners again somehow... if Aoi's such a map hotshot, he can find us another quick route an' then we'll be in Hokkan first. We'll find the Shinzahou this time round, Hiki — just you wait an' see!"

It was really starting to get late.

Aoiketsu cast a rueful glance out at the moon that now glittered high in the night sky, opening his bedroom door softly as he cast a glance around him for any sign of his young, unpredictable travel companions. Finding the corridor deserted, he let out a sigh, slipping into the hallway and pulling the door closed behind him with a faint click. With one more check to ensure that there was no movement from the girls' chamber, he hurried towards the main staircase, hoping against hope that he had not delayed too long, and that his friend would still be waiting for him.

"After Shishi threw all that shit at me, I don't want her or any of them to see what I'm doing." He muttered. "Dammit, why don't girls just go to bed and to sleep? Why do they insist on talking or yelling or whatever it is they do? It's a pain... I thought coming on this trip would make my job easier, but I'm starting to wonder. As if Myoume wasn't bad enough — now I have Shishi on my case too."

"Well?"

As he slipped into the back of the tavern, a familiar voice accosted him and he turned, offering his friend a faint smile as he came to sit down. He cast a final glance behind him, ensuring he had not been followed. Then he rested his chin in his hands, gazing from Maichu's half full glass to his friend's warm grin.

"I know it's late, but..." He murmured. "How are you going to ride outta here tonight if you drink yourself stupid first? Not to mention I don't want what I'm going to say to get garbled en route."

"Relax. I can drink a lot more than that before I get smashed." Maichu said with a shrug. "And you arrived at this place more than two hours ago — I saw you. I've been waiting since then — what happened?"

"Girls take forever to go to bed." Aoiketsu pulled a face. "Especially when they start spewing random shit your way — I have no idea what about, but I couldn't sneak down here whilst one or more of them was still on the prowl. It ain't as simple as it sounds, Maichu — believe me."

"Girls on the prowl?" Maichu's eyes opened wide, though there was

a teasing expression in their dark depths. "Aoi-kun! I thought you were *spying* on Suzaku's mob — what's going on with you and this bunch of women? I thought you were just travelling with them — am I wrong? Don't tell me that you've infiltrated a brothel by mistake?"

"Don't be stupid." Aoiketsu snorted. "Nothing of the sort. But I don't want them to get suspicious of me — any of them. I'm with Sukunami Hikari, after all — remember? The girl Commander sent me to find out about. I'm doing my duty."

"Oh yeah. That brat." Maichu pursed his lips.

"She's not a brat, you know."

"Aoi-kun, if she's the enemy, why are you defending her?" Maichu asked reasonably, taking a sip of his drink and gesturing to a nearby barman to fetch one for his friend. "I thought this girl was the spawn of Tamahome — ain't that like the devil in Kutou terms? Or at least, close enough to it."

"I don't understand what she is." Aoiketsu admitted. "To be truthful, they don't talk about it a lot. I don't know if that's because they don't trust me, or because they think I'm completely useless. I haven't worked it out. But travelling north with three women is not as easy as it's cracked up to be. And if I'm caught out like this..."

"You're a man. You drink." Maichu shrugged. "They'll get it."

"Mm." Aoiketsu frowned, but did not contradict his companion, and Maichu offered him a grin.

"So, aside from the girls going to bed all around you — whatever that means — what's been going on?" He asked. "Do you want me to go back to Hyoushin-sama and tell him that his spy has uncovered a few female undergarments but not much else of use?"

Aoiketsu reddened.

"I've done no such thing!" He exclaimed. "The only way I was able to slip away like this was to have my own chamber, anyway. It's a box, really — more of a cupboard, but I told them I'd been raised too well to consider sharing with the opposite sex so casually. So stop teasing me. I got enough of that from Shishi, and I don't need it from someone who's meant to be my ally."

"Shishi?"

"Don't ask. She's not important." Aoiketsu shook his head. "Just a bandit, nothing else. She's nothing to do with what Hyoushin-sama sent me here to do."

“So you don’t know what Sukunami Hikari’s secret is, and you can’t tell me anything?” Maichu’s eyebrow twitched up. “Are you sure there’s not something else going on? You can trust your old buddy Maichu, you know... we don’t have secrets, do we?”

“Maichu.” Aoiketsu shook his head impatiently. “If you’d shut it with the innuendoes, maybe I could tell you what I *do* know. Every second I’m down here is putting my cover in jeopardy. And I don’t really want to be put to death by their Emperor, if it’s all the same for you. Bad enough Miramu took a pot shot at me before we parted — he wanted to make it convincing, or some such thing. But I think he’s just a truly sick bastard... he wanted to make me bleed.”

“And vomit, no doubt.” Maichu reflected. “Oh well. I guess if they saw you looking that pathetic, they probably took to you right away. It wasn’t so stupid... you don’t look a lot like a soldier, when you’re heaving your guts up over a little blood.”

At that moment, the man returned with Aoiketsu’s drink, effectively stifling his response, and Maichu grinned at him, tossing a coin in the worker’s direction.

“Impeccable timing. Drink — it’s good stuff.” He instructed. “Better than the half rate imports we have to live with in the East.”

“Civil war disrupts everything, including trade.” Aoiketsu looked pensive, glancing down at the glass, then taking an obedient sip. “I’ve really seen the difference since I’ve been here. Kounan really is a prosperous and peaceful nation, Maichu. If ours can be even a little like this... I’d be content.”

“Then spill what you know... because that’s what we’re working towards, ain’t it?” Maichu reminded him. Aoiketsu swallowed his mouthful, nodding.

“Yes. It is.” He agreed. He frowned, sliding back his sleeve to examine the scarring wound on his arm. “By the way, do you suppose Hyoushin-sama knows that Miramu isn’t just a rogue hired to do dirty work for Kutou?”

“Mm?” Maichu frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Miramu.” Aoiketsu grimaced. “He’s a Byakko Seishi, Maichu. That’s how he slips in and out of places unseen, and how he gets such good results. But more importantly, it’s how he was able to get the fang from that Sairou shrine. I wondered at the time... remembering how difficult it was for us to get Seiryuu’s scale.”

“Son of a...” Maichu’s eyes widened. “No kidding?”

“No.” Aoiketsu shook his head. “The guy’s sister is one of my travel party — that Toroki girl. Which is why I need to be doubly careful. I’m not sure if she already has her sights on me. I don’t know what her three lines of sight have already seen or otherwise, and I’m treading a fine line as it is. But Miramu is Amefuri. His celestial mark is hidden by the collar he wears across his throat, but he’s one of them nonetheless. Hikari told me so, and the others have confirmed it.”

“Shit.” Maichu bit his lip. “You think the Commander *does* know?”

“Tell him and find out.” Aoiketsu suggested acerbically, taking another sip of his drink. As his friend had said, it was good quality, and it warmed him inside. “There’s one other thing, too.”

“Mm?”

“Suzaku’s Shinzahou isn’t something I can tell you about, yet, because they don’t talk about it. However, Suzaku’s relic is.” Aoiketsu pursed his lips. “It’s inside the mountain... Shishi said something about it. It’s sealed somewhere beneath the bandit mountain. I can’t remember the name of the relic off hand — if she even told me what it was. But the mountain is Reikaku-zan, in the west, towards the Sairou border. But even though it’s right under their nose, Suzaku’s people don’t seem to want to dig it out or even try to use it at the moment. Which is odd, considering how urgently Kintsusei-sama and Kikei-sama wanted us to retrieve Seiryuu’s scale.”

“Now, *that* the Commander will want to hear.” Maichu said pensively. “Inside of the mountain? Why the hell have they left it there?”

“Because there’s a shitload of bandits guarding it, maybe?” Aoiketsu shrugged. “No idea. Like I said, I ain’t really welcome on the mountain... since that kid was killed in Sairou it seems to be off limits an’ I don’t want to push it and break my cover. Shishi’s not bad with a sword but I could take her out — her Pa, on the other hand, ain’t a guy I want to mess with. He’s somethin’ of a legend in Kounan, especially in that area — He’s Tasuki an’ he ain’t the sort of person you want to antagonise. Everyone says he’s fair, but that he has one hell of a temper an’ right now, he’s not in a great mood.”

He sighed.

“I guess that’s impeded my progress a little, with Miramu havin’ killed that Jin guy.” He added. “Seems he wasn’t just some bandit, but that a lot of people back there thought a lot of him. Makes the whole thing a lot more sensitive to deal with — it didn’t help.”

“So that’s all you can tell me about it? Or why they’ve let it alone?”

“From the little I’ve understood from Myoume — Toroki — and the others, I think that in order to raise the spirit, they need the Shinzahou. Like the Emperor did with that weird Suiko woman from Seiryuu’s shrine.”

“And Catwoman.”

“Huh?”

“Kitora.” Maichu grinned. “Byakko’s mage. I had a brief message from Kayu before they left for the north — that’s how he described her. He was just passing on that he’d returned safely — but he mentioned her. I don’t think he liked her much.”

“All right.” Aoiketsu looked doubtful, but he nodded. “Yes. Byakko’s spirit, too. But if Suzaku’s Shinzahou is in Kounan, like the Commander believes... why haven’t they done anything about it? They know all about the legend and that Jin was killed by Miramu trying to get Byakko’s fang already. So why not use their power and raise their mage? I don’t understand, but I can’t ask questions exactly. As I said, I’m having to tread carefully.”

“Maybe they *don’t* have the Shinzahou.”

“Well, I’m starting to wonder.” Aoiketsu sighed. “But I’m sure they said they did. I don’t know. It makes no sense. And this Sukunami girl...”

He faltered, remembering once again how kind Hikari had been to him since he had joined their travel party.

“I’m beginning to think that the Commander is wrong about her. I mean, she... isn’t some kind of monster. Can she really be important? She’s just like a normal, ordinary village girl, to be honest. Her connection to Suzaku is just that she’s Tamahome’s daughter... it doesn’t seem to be anything else than that to me. They said something about Tamahome’s power having been sealed away — so the chances of her having any of her own isn’t great... surely? She can’t fight so well — she has no technique or training, not like Shishi does. She’s even scared of horses.”

He frowned.

“Come to think of it, she did say something about magic, once, but I’ve not seen her use any, not like Toroki. Maybe I’m remembering wrong... she just seems like any other kid.”

“Well, I guess you’ll have to dig deeper. Get to know her a little

more.” Maichu suggested. “Even you should be able to manage that. You’re pretty enough, even if you are a moron with women.”

“Maichu, shut your face.” Aoiketsu grimaced at him, unwilling to admit how uneasy this suggestion made him feel. He sighed, downing the remains of his drink and getting to his feet.

“I have to get back. Besides, I feel exposed down here, without my sword. It’s strange enough not carrying it as a matter of course — it still feels wrong.”

“But Kayu’s right — you do look the part of an exiled, yet pampered noble son.” Maichu teased. “Even if the irony is that you’re not Kaiga Aoiketsu after all.”

“Keep your damn voice down.” Aoiketsu snapped. “As far as we’re concerned, it’s who I am... and Commander hasn’t said any different.”

“Aoi?” Maichu’s eyes narrowed. “You almost sound like you’ve learnt something — have you found out, then, who your father is?”

“How would I do that, in Kounan?” Aoiketsu demanded. “I was born in Kutou, you moron.”

“I know, but...” Maichu frowned, grabbing his friend by the arm. “Listen. You and me, we’ve been buddies a long time, right?”

“Yes.” Aoiketsu nodded. “Of course. What about it?”

“If there was anything, you could tell me... yeah?”

“I could if I knew anything for certain.” Aoiketsu sighed, rubbing his temples. “I’m sorry. I’ve a lot weighing on me at the moment. Keeping my cover is a lot of pressure, and I’m having to keep a lot of things straight in my head. It’s helped, using the backstory I already have for the Kaiga family, and this ring my mother left is also a bonus, because it’s obviously a genuine noble signet ring of Kutou, so it helps authenticate my identity. But using my real name has its dangers too, if people were to realise that a Kaiga Aoiketsu serves in the Commander’s retinue. And I’m having to be so careful how I speak — an exiled noble doesn’t speak like a barracks soldier, after all.”

“I suppose I see your point.” Maichu acknowledged. “But even so — you seem wound up about this father illegitimacy thing. More than you have been before.”

Aoiketsu frowned, raising his gaze for a moment to meet his reflection’s identical one in the mirror that hung over the back of the bar. Then he nodded.

“I just wonder.” He admitted. “Something that Chichiri-san said, when they first took me in. About Kutou, about various things. About the massacre of the Kaiga family, and the Shougun. Kutou’s blue eyed avenger, that’s what he called him. It was sort of joking, but sort of not. But then, I stopped and I realised something that I never did before.”

“That the Shougun was a Hin? Idiot.”

“That the Shougun’s eyes were blue, Maichu.” Aoiketsu’s fingers strayed to his cheek. “And so are mine. It’s always been a focal point — even Miramu picked me out over it, calling them Western eyes. On the trip to Kounan, he told me plain that they were either Western settler eyes or Hin eyes... I’m sure that’s what he was implying, even if he wouldn’t say it direct. It’s been bugging me a while, since he mentioned it first on the boat across to Sairou, actually. How many others in our regiment can say the same? I don’t think I know a single other soldier in Hyoushin-sama’s retinue with blue eyes. When I was small, one of the nurses who tended me called me Aoime, because of it, instead of Aoiketsu. Because I was the only child she’d ever seen with blue eyes and she was sure it was an omen.”

“People in Kutou do have blue eyes sometimes. You said it yourself — f they come from the Western borderlands, they don’t have to be tribal.” Maichu objected. “Do you seriously think you’re the Shougun’s son, for crying out loud?”

“The only other man I know of with seiran blue eyes is Gi Koyuu, because one picture of him exists somewhere in the archive and when I was a small boy, I remember seeing it when I was learning about Kutou’s history.” Aoiketsu whispered. “The Gi family were from the borderlands. They were somehow connected to the Hin tribe, which Nakago’s mother originally came from — a tribe with Western roots. Remember, all the documents we studied always said that Nakago’s people came from the ‘far west’ — didn’t they? What if that didn’t mean Kutou originally, but that the Hin came from Sairou in the beginning, just like Hyoushin-sama’s people originated in Hokkan? And though Gi Koyuu wasn’t born a Hin, the Gi family *were* traders and mercenaries from the West originally — just like Miramu called it. And Gi Koyuu was the Shougun’s father. Wasn’t he?”

“Aoi-kun, are you sure Southern ale agrees with you?”

“Maichu, I’m serious.” Aoiketsu bit his lip. “My blood, remember? Inferior to that of a Celestial Warrior, but still, something about it caused a reaction. Diluted, maybe... but do I have Seishi blood? *Hin* blood? And if I do, what does that mean...?”

“Shit.” Maichu’s eyes widened as he digested the truth in his friend’s words. “You might actually be right. Shit... you might be... dammit, no wonder you’re such a pretty specimen! Wasn’t the Shougun meant to be pretty hot from a girl’s perspective? Hell, Aoi — and no wonder you’re such a good soldier!”

“Well, I don’t know it for sure.” Aoiketsu looked troubled. “But it would make things... make sense. That Hyoushin-sama would never train the son of his slave master, but the son of the Shougun — yes, *that* he might do. And the secret — whatever it is — that he and the Emperor share about me... if this is it... I can understand why they’ve kept it so quiet. There are as many people in Kutou who hate the Shougun as love him. Someone would want to see me dead. It’s safer to be Kaiga Aoiketsu... even if that isn’t my true name.”

“Your Ma must’ve been quite a jezebel, seducing the Shougun of Kutou behind her husband’s back like that.” Maichu looked impressed.

“I imagine it was the other way around. If someone betrayed the Kaiga family, it was probably my mother, and that was probably how.” Aoiketsu sighed. “Look, keep that to yourself, okay? I told you, I don’t know. And I won’t spread scandal or rumour that might be completely false. But... it’s another thing on my mind. That’s all. Nakago killed the last Emperor of Kounan, in case you’d forgotten. What the hell kind of reception do you think the current one would give me, if he thought I was the Shougun’s son?”

“No wonder you look like the world’s on your back.” Maichu slapped him on the shoulder sympathetically. “Tough break. But hey, it’s cool with me. I’ll keep it quiet. And you’ve done your duty by your King and country today, for sure. I’ll ride out of here direct and send word to Hyoushin-sama about Suzaku’s shrine. He sent an envoy to me discreetly this morning, to give me further orders, and the man’s still in the vicinity, so that shouldn’t be a problem... you timed your arrival here just right.”

“I wanted to meet up with you as soon as I could.” Aoiketsu agreed.

“You missed me that much?”

“Actually... yeah, I guess I did.” Aoiketsu looked rueful. “I’m not used to being surrounded by women.”

“Shit — maybe *I* should have been the undercover agent instead.” Maichu rubbed his chin pensively. “Being surrounded by girls is my speciality.”

“Weirdly enough, I’ve even missed *that*.” Aoiketsu said ruefully, and

Maichu laughed, slapping his friend on the shoulder playfully.

“Well, at least at this point the two of us are still alive, which is a good sign.” He said philosophically. “And Kayu too, since he got back to Kutou safe enough. Plus, what you’ve given me is somethin’ to tell them at least — next time, the Shinzahou?”

“All right. I’ll try.” Aoiketsu nodded his head. “I had a good look at the maps yesterday when I was working out whether or not we could make it here as quickly as this. I’m pretty sure of the route we’ll take next, even though I’ve not discussed it with the girls yet. I estimate that in about three days time, we’ll be due to cross the border. Yukigase — that’s where we’ll spend the night before, I think. Meet me there. If we’re delayed, wait for me — all right? I never know what’s going to happen, travelling with Shishi and the others — she’s insane enough for all of them, to be honest. Don’t cross into Hokkan till we’ve spoken, because I want to get more information before you rejoin the others or speak to the Commander directly. Make sure you’re there and I’ll tell you what I know.”

“You got it.” Maichu grinned at him. “Take care and don’t get killed. I’ll do the same and see you in three days.”

With that he was gone, and Aoiketsu frowned for a moment, considering the conversation. He truly *had* missed Maichu’s cheerful, mischievous company, for though they teased and bantered, the two had been partners in crime for six years. From their first meeting they had soon developed a bond and Aoiketsu sighed, shaking his head slowly as he turned to make his way back towards his chamber.

“Sooner I find out what the Commander needs to know, sooner I can go home.” He reflected. “War-torn Kutou or otherwise, people I care about are there. And if it wasn’t for the sake of those people — of all Kutou’s people — I wouldn’t be here at all.”

“That’s a serious face, Aoi-kun.”

The woman’s voice startled him and he jumped half out of his skin, almost tumbling over the table by the door as he raised his gaze to the amused, indigo one of the Byakko Seishi. In the semi-light of the bar, she seemed even more ethereal than ever, and he eyed her warily, inwardly wondering how much of his conversation she had overheard.

“It’s late.” Myoume broke the silence, reaching out to take him by the arm as she led him back towards the stairs. “You shouldn’t be wandering the halls alone at night, if you’re afraid my brother might make another attack on you.”

“Your brother is a menace.” Aoiketsu muttered. “Please be careful where you’re putting your hands, Myoume-san. Your fingers are right over my scarred arm, and even through the sleeve of my robe it hurts.”

“Ah yes. Sorry.” Myoume smiled apologetically, obediently sliding her hand towards his wrist as she tightened her grip. “Late night drinking is a pastime of the exiled nobility of Kutou, then?”

“Men drink.” With a fleeting memory of Maichu’s words, Aoiketsu met her gaze impassively. “But then I’m sure you are aware of that.”

“Mmm.” Myoume nodded her head, and for a few moments they walked along in silence. Then, as they reached the top of the steps, she turned sharply, facing him with a direct, searching look and almost causing him to tumble backwards down the stairwell.

“Will you be careful?” He hissed, gripping hold of the railing tightly between the fingers of his free hand as he righted himself. “Or are you deliberately trying to kill me, Myoume-san!?”

Myoume’s lips twitched into a playful smile.

“I don’t believe in it.” She said lightly. “Killing, I mean, for the sake of killing. My brother does far too much of it — he’s more than filled my family’s blood quota. You’re quite safe, I promise you. But I was concerned that you weren’t in your room... so I came to find you. That’s all.”

“I do not need a nanny... and you’re not so much older than me that you can call yourself a surrogate mother, you know.” Aoiketsu said frankly.

“An older sister, maybe.” Myoume reflected. “Myou-nee-chan. What do you think?”

“You didn’t have to come get me. I wasn’t going to leave the inn — I’m not completely suicidal.”

“And Maichu took all the information he needed?”

The words were soft-spoken, but at them, Aoiketsu froze, staring up at her in alarm. She smiled, winking as she indicated the hand that still held his wrist and as his gaze strayed to it, he cursed, realising that not only was it her right hand, but that it was unsheathed, her glittering index finger brushing against his beating pulse.

“Careless.” She added reproachfully.

Aoiketsu bit his lip, pulling his hand away as he gauged whether or

not he could overpower her and flee before the alarm was sounded. As if guessing his thoughts, Myoume laughed.

“Come, Aoi. Are you the kind of soldier who assaults a woman?” She asked gently. Aoiketsu flinched, eying her in troubled silence. Myoume spread her hands.

“Would it comfort you to know that I knew before that, who you were? Or at least, I guessed your errand?” She asked him evenly. “You seem to forget that many of the things that happen I’ve seen a long time before they do. And... more importantly... I don’t often forget a face. It’s true that you did not raise arms against me within Byakko’s shrine, nor did we even cross paths. But I have seen your face before, in my dreams and visions over the years. And I would never forget either such beautiful blue eyes or this sense of uniqueness in the aura... not in the soul of an Eastern born boy.”

Aoiketsu cursed, sinking back against the wall as he cast her an apprehensive glance.

“What are you going to do? What have you... already done?” He asked softly. Myoume shrugged.

“What can I do?” She asked lightly. “You’ve already passed your message on to your friend, and he will be long gone from here. It seems a bit late to do anything, doesn’t it?”

“I meant... are you going to tell... Hikari and the others?”

“Would you like me to?”

“No!” Aoiketsu shook his head hurriedly. “Look, Myoume, if you touched my wrist and saw my thoughts you know that I’m not doing this because I want to hurt anyone. It’s not about that!”

“Aoi-kun, relax.” Myoume laughed, taking him by the arm and leading him gently to his tiny bedchamber, pushing back the door and ushering him inside as she reached for flint to light the chamber’s sole lamp. In the flickering flamelight, she recovered her exposed right hand, sinking down on the low-slung bed and indicating for him to join her. “Listen to me. I’m not going to betray you to Hikari or the others. You’ll do it yourself soon enough, and if I was to intervene...”

She shook her head.

“If I keep your secret, then it is more beneficial in the long run than if I don’t.” She said reflectively. “Because if I reveal you now, you will have to leave. And if you leave, then when danger strikes...”

She smiled, spreading her hands.

“Besides, I am not from Kounan. My aims are different — I don’t really have a fight with you as such.” She added. “Aside from saving this world, and from repaying the blood debt my brother left when he slew the bandit Jin, my involvement is different. And therefore I have no personal interest in to whom you sell Suzaku’s secrets. After all, they are Suzaku’s secrets. Not Sairou’s. In the long run they don’t really matter much.”

“You... don’t care?” Aoiketsu looked startled. “You must know I told Maichu about Amefuri’s celestial identity, as well as the whereabouts of Suzaku’s shrine... that doesn’t bother you at all?”

“No, because I knew you’d do it.” Myoume said comfortably. “Maybe that was true that before I even met you. So really, I’m not at all surprised we’re here having this conversation. In some respects, to me, it’s already been had.”

She eyed him keenly.

“That must sound odd to you.” She realised, and Aoiketsu nodded. “Well, then let me tell you something else. Something that might explain my motivation a little more clearly. Do you know why, when my brother turned against his Byakko roots — do you know why I chose to stand against him, even though I knew it meant that one of us would probably wind up killing the other? That one day there would be a confrontation between siblings that only one of us would walk away from?”

“No.” Aoiketsu admitted. “Why?”

“Because I saw further than Miramu could.” Myoume twisted her fingers together absently. “He saw the pain of his own family, the betrayal of those closest to him — he understood the hurt and pain of the things he saw through his own eyes. But I carry more than my own line of sight, Aoi. In my dreams and visions, I see much more than the average person. Since I was a child, one vision has recurred, time and time again. The end of existence — the desolation of the entire world. And these images have grown stronger in the last year. I knew that Kutou would come, looking for Byakko’s treasure. I knew I would not be able to hold out against them alone, yet I still held my post, waiting for them to come — because it must happen, so I made sure it did. And you are the same. I knew that Kutou would send a spy, and that he would send secrets of Suzaku to Kutou. Yet I’ve let you... because that’s what I knew would happen. It must happen. So it has.”

“So you just, what, don’t try and change bad things from

happening, even if they do?" Aoiketsu frowned. "Maichu and I are risking our lives to help save our country — and you're just sitting back and saying, "it's fate?"

Myoume eyed him thoughtfully.

"I have never yet been able to change one of my visions." She admitted. "I tried to prevent Jin from being killed by my brother, by warning him to keep away from Kitora's shrine when the moon was high in the sky. Yet even though he knew, he still went there. He still gave his life to protect Hikari. I could not prevent it. Maybe my warning drove him there. How do I know if I am an instrument of fate or not — whether my intervention might bring the actions about?"

"But even so, at least if you do something, you've tried." Aoiketsu murmured. "My country is a bloody mess of war and betrayal, but I won't sit back and let that carry on. If I make it worse by serving the Emperor and spying on Kounan then I do. But I've tried, Myoume. I've tried. If I die, then I do. But for Kutou... I've tried."

"Your argument suggests I should tell Hikari and Shishi your true errand, you know."

"I... I suppose it does." Aoiketsu looked sheepish. Myoume laughed.

"No, I won't tell them." She said softly. "Because I know that you are meant to travel with us a little longer. Besides, as I said, they will know soon enough who you really are. You'll betray yourself to them — you won't need my help to do it. And even if you believe you've come to find out the location and nature of Suzaku no Shinzahoo, I promise you that that's one report you will never make to the Emperor of Kutou. By the time you reach Yukigase, you will have made up your mind to that fact... believe me, Aoi-kun. What you have told them is of little real harm to Hikari or Shishi's mission. And more importantly, it is of little harm to either one of them. Whilst I am not here to protect Kounan — I might try to intervene if I thought those girls were in danger. But as it happens, your presence among us is going to prove valuable in the next few days. So I won't risk your going away. I know all will end well."

"You're confusing me." Aoiketsu rubbed his temples. "If you think I'll have a fit of conscience and confess, I won't. Kutou's future is important to me."

"Would you like to see Kutou's future, Aoi?" Myoume eyed him questioningly, and he shrank back from her, uncertainty in his blue eyes as he saw the strange glitter in her gaze.

“I can’t. I don’t have your sight.” He said hurriedly.

“True. But with the power I’ve absorbed from your memories, I can show you anyway.” Myoume said softly, removing her glove once more and spreading her hand in front of her as, before them, the wall of the chamber began to twist and distort into an image. As it became clearer, Aoiketsu was aware of a great, surging energy blazing across the landscape, leaving devastation in its path. A cloud of heavy darkness hung low in the sky, sucking the life and vivacity from plants and people alike as many dropped where they fell. And as the land became quiet, not even a bird circled in the sky overhead. Aoiketsu gulped, grabbing at Myoume’s hand and forcing it down as the pictures disappeared.

“Stop it.” He whispered. “That’s not... it can’t...”

“If the Emperor of Kutou assembles the power of four Shinzahou, this is the future of this world.” Myoume said softly, sliding her glove back over her hand. “What you’ve seen is what I’ve seen since I was a little girl. For Kutou. For Hokkan, for Sairou... for Kounan. The whole of this world... devoid of life. And do you know why?”

Aoiketsu shook his head wordlessly.

“Because a force behind the throne of Kutou seeks to use this power for his own ends. And he will use the Gods to do one, unforgivable thing.” Myoume murmured. “He will rid the world, one by one, of the Seishi that hold its very existence steady. Between the twenty eight mansions of the stellar sky, this world can exist. Whilst we all exist, so can this world. Without us — if we are extinguished — life in the Shijin Tenchishou cannot continue. He will doom everyone in his quest for power. This is the one and only vision I care about preventing, Aoi. But in order for me to have any chance of doing so, I have to see it all more clearly. And in order to do that, I have to let events I have already seen unfold. One vision leads to another... at present, all I can do is sit, wait and watch. And hope that somewhere, in all the things I come to see will be a way in which to prevent the end of everything. I am helpless at present — I lack detail. Only by seeing my other predictions come to be can I make the visions of this devastation stronger and clearer in my mind’s eye. Such is the gift and curse of Toroki’s three lines of sight.”

“A force... behind Kutou’s...” Aoiketsu paled, feeling sick. Slowly Myoume nodded.

“A man of tribal birth.” She whispered. Aoiketsu’s eyes widened.

“You think... it’s Hyoushin-sama, don’t you?” He demanded.

Myoume shrugged.

“I don’t know.” She admitted. “But it had crossed my mind. Yes. He was a slave. In fits and starts, I think, perhaps I’ve begun to see shades of him more clearly. To be a slave and to suffer at the hands of the Eastern lords — I’m sure such a thing would be enough to make him seek revenge. And that he should continue to cross my path — that he would be so often at the edges of my senses, whenever I think about the end of this world... I’ve had no vision that suggests his guilt, but the motive is there for sure. I think it’s possible. Yes.”

“No.” Aoiketsu shook his head, pushing her away from him as he got to his feet. “No! You might be able to see all these things, but you do *not* know the Commander and you’re wrong! He’s the most loyal man at Kintsusei’s court, and I know, because I’ve known him since I was a small boy! Yes, maybe he was a slave, and perhaps he has suffered. But... you’re wrong. I *know* you’re wrong! Hyoushin-sama isn’t even interested in the beast Gods — not even Seiryuu! He seeks to do the Emperor’s bidding, like all of us. He’s *not* the one you mean!”

Myoume’s eyes narrowed, and she shrugged.

“Time will tell.” She said frankly. “All I know is what I’ve told you. That one of tribal blood who lurks behind the throne will betray your Emperor. Names and faces I do not see, not yet. And you are the least of Kounan’s problems when that happens. The hate and dishonesty fester within Kutou itself. Nothing any of us do here can prevent it. Not at the moment, anyway. Except, of course, by ensuring that the Emperor of Kutou cannot assemble the four Shinzahou. And at the moment, he can’t. *One* thing stands in his way.”

She smiled at him, and he eyed her warily.

“Which is?”

“Should I tell you that? It’s information you seek, after all.”

“Myoume... tell me. You’ve shown me all this for a reason — at least make your point clearly.”

“Very well.” Myoume sat back against the wall with a sigh. “Suzaku no Shinzahou.”

“Suzaku no...” Aoiketsu frowned. “So the Suzaku Shichi Seishi *do* have it? They *are* protecting it, after all?”

“No. At the moment, *they* aren’t.” Myoume’s eyes danced. “At the moment, in fact, *we* are, Aoi-kun.”

“We... are?” Aoiketsu stared. “What the hell are you talking about, you crazy woman?”

“Now you sound more like the soldier you’ve grown up to be, Kaiga Aoiketsu.” Myoume looked amused. “Although your cover has been very convincing. You do know a lot about Kaiga Gin and his family, and that ring is authentic, I’m sure of that.”

“That’s because Kaiga Ruiren *was* my mother, and she gave it to me when I was born, as a keepsake of my family. I didn’t lie about any of that.” Aoiketsu said stiffly, instinctively covering the ring with his other hand. “Stop changing the subject. Tell me about the Shinzahou. Are you saying it’s here? With us? Now? That Shishi and Hikari... brought it with them?”

“I’d say that was true.” Myoume laughed, infuriating the young spy all the more. “Oh, Aoiketsu... your face is a picture. Really. It is.”

“Call me Aoi, or don’t call me anything at all.” Aoiketsu snapped. “What are you getting at?”

“How do you feel, *Aoi-kun*, about selling the lives of others into slavery?” Myoume was suddenly serious, fixing him with a grave, searching gaze.

“How do you think I feel? It’s evil!” Aoiketsu reacted at this indignantly. “Just because I have ties to the Kaiga family, do you really think...? Myoume, the man I respect more than anyone in the world was once a slave... that anyone could have made him or any of his kind suffer makes me sick inside. Why ask such a stupid question?”

“Because in order to give the red bird’s Shinzahou to your Commander, you will have to become a slave trader of sorts.” Myoume said seriously, all humour gone from her expression now as she met his gaze soberly. “Aoi, Suzaku no Shinzahou isn’t a necklace, or an earring, or a hand-mirror belonging to the Priestess. It’s something more. Something deeper. Something which Suzaku no Miko held dearer to her than anything else in existence. Suzaku no Shinzahou isn’t a thing at all... it’s something crafted from love. Legend has always said that Suzaku is the God which represents love, and renewed life. In Suzaku no Miko’s Shinzahou, both of these are clearly reflected.”

“I’m not sure I understand.” Aoiketsu’s brows knitted together. “Suzaku’s Shinzahou isn’t a thing?”

“No.” Myoume shook her head. “Suzaku’s Shinzahou is a *person*. Aoi, Suzaku’s Shinzahou is Suzaku no Miko’s own flesh and blood —

the child she bore with the Suzaku warrior known as Tamahome.”

“A... *person*?” Aoiketsu paled, and Myoume nodded.

“Yes.” She murmured. “Suzaku no Shinzahou is Sukunami Hikari.”

Chapter 9

Chapter Eight

Suzaku no Shinzahou.

Aoiketsu flopped back on his bed, gazing sightlessly up at the ceiling as he struggled to digest Myoume's words. The prophet had left him alone, but despite the fact he finally had solitude, he knew that he would be unlikely to sleep.

At last he had the information that Maichu had hoped to take back to Kutou — the information his Commander had sent him south with the hope of obtaining. He should, he mused bitterly, be pleased that the Byakko warrior had gifted the news directly into his hands... but instead he felt only emptiness and doubt. Myoume's other revelations twisted through his thoughts, and at length he sat up, tossing his pillow aside in a fit of frustrated pique.

"Dammit, what's wrong with me!" He muttered, clenching his fists as he fought to contain his temper. "That woman — Kayu wasn't kidding when he said she was sinister. Making those pictures appear... but what if she's right? She predicted that bandit's death, after all. Or is it just her playing to my nightmares? But still... why did she tell me Hikari's secret? She seemed so sure that I wouldn't betray it... how could she be? I'm Kutou's spy. I'm not Kounan's lackey."

He got to his feet, moving to the window as he gazed out at the cloudless night's sky.

"Is it because of what Shishi said?" He wondered. "About Hikari's feelings? I can't have become that soft... can I? Tamahome's daughter — that's the secret I was sent here to discover. Hikari's true nature, and her involvement. Kutou need Suzaku's Shinzahou... but... at what cost should they get it?"

He leant up against the glass, resting his head against the cool panes as he digested what that would mean.

"Myoume's right." He realised sadly. "If I told Kutou who Hikari was, it would be like saying she wasn't a person — that she didn't have rights or feelings of her own. Enemy or not, I'm not that cold. She's still a living being and I won't condone her being taken anywhere against her will. But even so... it creates a problem. What can I tell Maichu in Yukigase? What can I do about any of this?"

He closed his eyes, remembering the long, hard ride north through the southern countryside. Somehow, he realised, it hadn't seemed such a difficult journey, when he had had Hikari to watch over. He groaned, berating himself for his straying thoughts.

"Shishi's more right than she knows." He muttered aloud. "I've become fond of Hikari and I don't know what to do. Myoume's confidence in me must be because she knows even if I am a spy — even if I am from Kutou — I'm weak. I don't have the conviction or ruthlessness to obey my Emperor or my Commander in this. But Hyoushin-sama was a slave — would he condone the idea of Hikari being brought to Kutou in chains? I can't believe he would. But we didn't expect the Shinzahou to be a person. A treasure is one thing — but a human being? And what Myoume said — about destruction and about her being the only one who can stop all of that happening? If she was telling the truth — is Hikari more powerful than *any* of the Shinzahou Kutou have sought out so far? I wish I understood more. I wish I knew..."

He frowned.

"I can't even ask her, because if I did, she'd want to know how I knew." He realised. "She has become my friend and she has been kind to me. But she hasn't trusted me with that information. Yet she's Suzaku no Miko's child, and her treasure. No wonder she's so closely associated with Shishi and the others. And the magic she talked about — it all makes a strange kind of sense now. But she doesn't seem divine — not like Suiko. She seems like an ordinary girl. Can she really have the power of a God sealed within her? If so, *why* do Kounan need Shinzahou so badly? They have their own — why do they need to gather others? Is it really because of Myoume's vision, after all?"

He sank back down on his bed, turning this thought over in his mind for a moment.

"What if Kounan knew about this before." He murmured. "Kutou haven't had the benefit of Toroki's sight, but what if Myoume is right? What if that's why they've been trying to get Shinzahou — to prevent Kintsusei-sama from uniting the four of them in Kutou? What if... instead of acting as Kutou's enemy, they... they're actually trying to act as saviour for everyone else? It's not about Kutou after all — it's about this."

He ran his fingers through his thick dark hair.

"So where does that leave me?" He whispered. "Kayu said the same

thing — about a tribal traitor at the Emperor's court. I don't believe — can't believe — that that person is the Commander. Equally, though, I can't think of anyone else tribal who's close enough to him to betray him. So... I'm stuck. I can't report any of this back to anyone, in case it gets to the wrong person. I believe in my Emperor and I can't let that happen. If it's like Myoume thinks, and someone is willing to go to those lengths — they wouldn't hesitate to kill an Emperor."

He glanced up, catching sight of his reflection in the small, smoke-edged mirror and his eyes widened as a sudden realisation jolted through his senses.

"Shit." He murmured, reaching up to touch his cheek as he met his own seiran eyes with a troubled gaze. "Blue eyes. Nakago's eyes? Am I right about that after all? Nakago was... was Hin. Was the traitor... the traitor Myoume believes exists — was it... me?"

He swallowed hard.

"I'm in Kounan, debating the idea of withholding information in case it falls into the wrong hands." He realised. "But what if *I'm* the wrong hands? If I'm Nakago's son then I... I'm part Hin. I'm tribal, too — just like the Commander. And there's no way he would ever betray the Emperor. But I... what I'm thinking already is treason. What I... the friendship Hikari and I... that's betrayal. Even considering these things... I was sent here to discover Suzaku's Shinzahou. If Myoume's right, I've succeeded. But... she said... that I wouldn't give that secret to Kutou. And although I hate to admit it... I think... she's right."

He groaned.

"Maybe that does make me Kutou's traitor." He acknowledged sadly. "Maybe by doing any of this I've set wheels in motion..."

He faltered, as Myoume's words echoed once again through his head.

"I have to let events I have already seen unfold. One vision leads to another. All I can do is sit, wait and watch. I am helpless at present — I lack detail. Only by seeing my other predictions come to be can I make the visions of this devastation stronger and clearer in my mind's eye."

"Is *that* it?" He wondered helplessly. "Is she manipulating me — and Kounan — and everything else just towards that one goal? If so — is she as ruthless as her brother when it comes to doing what she has to? She says she won't betray me, but I only have her word on it. And I can't betray myself — even less now can I talk to anyone about this."

He sighed.

“Besides, Hikari would never forgive me for lying to her... for being a spy.” He murmured. “And I... I don’t like how that feels. Dammit, no matter what I said to Shishi, that girl’s more right than she realises. Hikari’s been kind to me and I... I’m fond of her. I don’t want to hurt her... I want to... *protect* her?”

His eyes widened at this realisation, and he dropped back against his pillows, his heart heavy.

“I’m so confused.” He admitted. “I never expected to actually like the ones I was sent here to watch. And all of this... what am I supposed to do, now? Can I prevent this happening in Kutou — or am I going to be the one to bring everything crumbling down around me?”

So they had arrived in Touran.

Kayu let out a sigh of relief as he followed his companions into the familiar city inn, secretly glad that their journey was at an end and that they would have a proper bed to sleep in in the cold, biting atmosphere of Hokkan’s summer season. Although there was no snow on the ground of the city itself, the air was unforgiving in its frigid atmosphere, and on the horizon, as they had ridden in, the snow on the mountains had been as thick and dense as ever.

“We’re here.” Ouno echoed his own thoughts and he turned, nodding his head.

“The sooner we get here, the sooner we leave, right?” He asked ruefully, and Ouno smiled, suppressing a shiver.

“No kidding.” he agreed fervently. “We’re trained to do all kinds of shit, Kayu — but freezin’ to death in the north country ain’t among them.”

“Yeah.” Kayu grimaced back. “It’s worse for me, too. I’ve ridden across so much land in the last few days, you know. And in Kounan, it’s friggin’ scorching hot. Tropical, even. And now this. My body isn’t built for it.”

“We will stay in Touran a few days, I imagine.” Hyoushin’s voice cut across their conversation, and Kayu caught the commander’s eye, flushing slightly as he registered the faint reproach in their amethyst depths. “We have no clear leads this time on what we are looking for. So I imagine we will be busy from tomorrow, once more speaking to the local people. Fortunately the folk in the North are friendly and helpful when it comes to their history and their geography... I do not

think we will find it hard to elicit information if we are careful.”

He paused, his gaze narrowing, and Kayu found himself wondering — not for the first time — what his enigmatic Commander was thinking.

“For the night, you are dismissed.” He said slowly. “You will all need to eat and sleep for tomorrow’s task — I realise the journey has not been easy on you all. Take this time to recover as much as you can.”

He glanced at the mages.

“The pair of you will not cause us any trouble in this territory, where we are strangers.” He added softly, a warning in his level tones. “Suiko, you have travelled with us before, and you understand better than Kitora that this is not some pleasure mission. I do not wish to wake in the morning to find the entire town flattened because the pair of you have decided to have some kind of altercation. You are both mages representing divine entities — I would be grateful if you would try to behave that way.”

“You wouldn’t speak like that to me if you realised that all it would take would be for me to flex my fingers and you’d find yourself impaled.” Kitora said darkly. “I have power over wooden elements, you know. Just because I have no weapon doesn’t mean I’m unarmed. You should speak with more respect, if you know I’m a divine spirit.”

“When you behave like one, I will treat you thus.” Came Hyoushin’s even response. “I am not afraid of you, and I will not have the people here inconvenienced by your temper. You may be Byakko’s mage, but you will do as you are bidden on this mission. Otherwise you will be sealed away once more. I will tolerate no trouble from either you or from Suiko — you are here entirely on my Emperor’s errand and that is all. Is that understood? You will obey orders, or you will be dealt with as any of my men would be.”

Kayu flinched at the impassiveness of his Commander’s tones, and Kitora’s eyes flecked with anger. But before she could react, Suiko grabbed her by the arm.

“I won’t let her be a problem to you, Hyoushin.” She said, in her strange, slightly petulant tones.

“Like you could stop me — a weak half-raised mage like you.” Kitora smirked, and Suiko’s eyes narrowed.

“Better than a dirty, smelly catwoman.” She snapped back. “Hyoushin said behave, so behave yourself already. You already smell

like that horrible Sairou man — don't make it worse by acting like him."

"Enough." Hyoushin raised his hands. "You are dismissed. Bear in mind that we are guests here — all of you. Tomorrow I will require all of your skills — for tonight, you may rest."

His gaze fell once more on Kayu, and he inclined his head slightly in the young soldier's direction.

"Kayu, I would like a brief word before we retire." He added. "The rest of you may go."

"Me, sir?" Kayu's heart froze in his chest as he stared at his Commander in confusion, the other soldiers dispersing as they caught the expression in their leader's gaze. After a moment of hesitation, Suiko's grip on Kitora's arm tightened, and she pulled the Byakko mage from the chamber, leaving the two — Commander and soldier — alone in the foyer of the inn.

"Hyoushin-sama?" Kayu murmured. "Is something wrong?"

"Not especially." Hyoushin shook his head. "Although you appear tired, Kayu — I imagine that your recent travelling has taken a toll on you."

"I'm all right, sir."

"Yes, I'm sure." Hyoushin nodded. "You are a well-trained soldier and you are capable of a good deal of endurance. However, it is not just that. You seem to be troubled by something on this trip. I understand your concerns about your friends and their safety — but I have faith in them to carry out the rest of their mission with little complication. Don't you?"

"Yes, of course I do." Kayu looked startled.

"Then you must be preoccupied for another reason, and as your Commander, I should like to relieve your mind."

"Relieve my..." Kayu hesitated, staring at the Meihi in astonishment. Inwardly he berated his unsettled composure, knowing that there was no way he could voice his true concerns.

"How do you tell your Commander that someone suspects him of treason, and that you've been instructed to spy on him?" He wondered to himself. "It's not even that I'm really sure myself, whether or not he's capable of betraying the Emperor. But I can't imagine he'd be too amused, if he knew what Kikei-sama had asked me to do. Or if he knew I had a mirror like his in my pack..."

“Kayu?” Hyoushin prompted softly, and Kayu swallowed, shaking his head.

“I’m fine.” He said at length. “I suppose it’s just been concerning me... Toroki’s... prophesy.”

“Ah.” Hyoushin’s expression flickered faintly for a moment, then he nodded. “I see. Toroki.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do you have so much faith in the prediction of a foreign prophet?”

“I... don’t know.” Kayu admitted. “I don’t even really understand what she said. Maybe that’s why it bothers me... *because* I don’t understand what she said.”

“There seems little point in concerning yourself on something you cannot decipher.” Hyoushin said levelly.

“Doesn’t it bother you, though, sir? The way she spoke?”

“Not particularly.” Hyoushin shook his head, although Kayu saw a faint glitter of something in the violet eyes, and he realised with a jolt that his Commander was not being entirely honest. For the first time since he had entered the Meihi’s service, he wondered whether or not his straight-forward, direct leader was deceiving him.

“Is Kikei-sama right?” He wondered. “Shit, is he worried about Toroki’s words — because... they’re true?”

“Kayu, I wish to ask you something.” Hyoushin said softly, and Kayu glanced at his companion, a quizzical expression in his dark eyes.

“Yes, sir?”

“Do you have faith in your Emperor?”

“Yes, sir.” Kayu blinked, nodding his head. “Absolutely and completely.”

“Would anything induce you to betray him?”

Kayu’s heart froze, and he shook his head.

“Not a chance!” He exclaimed. “Of course it wouldn’t!”

“Then you have nothing to worry about.” Hyoushin’s lips twitched into a faint smile. “If you have faith in the King you serve, and in his commands, you have nothing to fear from a foreign-born witch. You have too much imagination, sometimes, and it induces you to worry

more than you need about things that are out of your control. This is your failing, perhaps. But if you have such loyalty to your Emperor — there is nothing for you to worry about.”

Kayu stared at his Commander for a moment, then, slowly, he nodded his head.

“I... I understand.” He murmured.

“My only task is to come here and carry out the task given me.” Hyoushin continued. “Nothing else matters. Therefore I have no interest in the words of Toroki. And you should not either. It is not for you to worry about her actions... those concerns belong with Kintsusei-sama and myself.”

“I... I suppose so.”

“Then you should release yourself from this burden, and take some time to relax before we begin our search tomorrow.” Hyoushin reflected. “Worrying creates its own fear — and its own recklessness. You are too good a soldier to allow that to happen to you — so long as you take it in hand now. You are dismissed, Kayu — I will see you again tomorrow morning.”

“Yes, sir.” Kayu saluted, nodding his head. “Thank you. I... I’ll do my best to think about what you said.”

“Good.” Hyoushin remarked. “Then there is nothing more to be said.”

With that he was gone, and Kayu hesitated for a moment, digesting the conversation carefully.

“He speaks so evenly, and about the Emperor, too... but I can’t see behind his mask.” He realised. “I don’t know whether he tells the truth or whether he doesn’t. For the first time tonight I thought maybe he was lying to me... that Toroki did bother him, even though he says she didn’t. And... because of that... I’m no less concerned than I was before. I need to get to the bottom of this, and quickly — before it costs me my sanity and my Emperor his life!”

“You know, even though it’s still Kounan, Choukou is really different from the area around Reikaku-zan, isn’t it?”

As the group of travellers left the inn, Hikari cast a glance around her, taking in the busy, bustling town with curious eyes. “Early in the morning everyone is as busy as they are in Souun — but somehow it’s not the same.”

“Souun is bandit protected land.” Shishi said frankly. “That’s why, Hiki. This area’s controlled by the richer families, so it’s completely different. Although I ain’t got a clue what kind of people they are. I guess you’ll have to ask Chichiri — since he grew up around here, I guess he’d know more about it.”

“So Chichiri’s from the north, then?” Aoiketsu asked hesitantly, and at his tentative expression, Shishi sighed, shaking her head.

“Aoi, what I said last night... forget about it. Okay? All of it.” She said sheepishly, as the young man’s eyes opened wide with surprise. “I’m sorry. I was tired and I ripped in on you. Forget it. All right? I should’a kept my mouth shut.”

“I... er... all right.” Aoiketsu’s brows furrowed, his gaze flitting briefly to Hikari, who pinkened, lowering her gaze.

“Chichiri told us himself that he came from the area near the Shouryuu river.” She said softly. “But his village was destroyed in a flood.”

“A flood?” Aoiketsu looked thoughtful. “Was that the flood that devastated Seisen-mura, at the beginning of the Kutou-Kounan conflict?”

“What are you talking about? Where the hell is Seisen-mura?” Shishi blinked, staring at him in confusion, and Aoiketsu looked rueful.

“I’m sorry. It’s Kutou’s history, I suppose.” He admitted. “I know that a river called Shouryuu was flooded at the start of the war. But Seisen is in Kutou — or was then, at the very least. I suppose it has nothing to do with Chichiri — I should have thought more clearly before I mentioned it.”

“Chichiri didn’t tell me the name of his village, but I’m pretty sure it was in Kounan.” Hikari recovered herself, shaking her head. “After all, he’s a Suzaku Shichi Seishi, right? That would make better sense.”

“This city is quite significant though, in Kounan’s history.” Myoume came up behind them at that moment, casting them a smile as the three turned to greet her. “I think before we go any further, it would be as well to take a walk out of the city and see something... an important marker in Kounan’s past.”

“We don’t have time to sight-see, Myoume.” Shishi objected. “I thought we were trying to keep ahead of the East... we need to be moving on towards Yukigase and the border already.”

“We do.” Myoume nodded her head. “But even so, I think it’s important. For all of you — you too, Aoi-kun — to see this place. Besides, I promised Chichiri that when we came to this place, I’d make sure to bring you there and take a moment to pass on a message for him. So we might as well all go. I think... considering... it wouldn’t do any harm. And it’s in the right direction, so it wouldn’t be too far out of our way.”

“It would be, if we walk. We’ll have to come back for the horses.” Shishi objected, and Myoume shrugged.

“I suppose so.” She owned. “But even so... I think we should go. If I’m right, I think it’s along this street and then turn right — we can get out of Choukou more easily that way, and into the hills that surround it. And we’ll be able to see the Shouryuu — which is our next landmark, I think — isn’t it, Aoi?”

“Yes.” Aoiketsu agreed, surprised. “We’ll need to follow the Shouryuu some way before we get to Yukigase, I think.”

“Then it won’t be a wasted journey at all.” Myoume looked satisfied. “Good.”

“Where are we going?” Hikari eyed the prophet curiously, and Myoume’s smile widened.

“You’ll see.” She said softly. “Follow me.”

With that she took a purposeful few steps along the uneven stone street and, after exchanging nonplussed glances, her young companions hurried to catch up with her. As the prophet had said, the city boundary was not a long walk and, as they began the steady climb up into the northern hills, Hikari was struck by how clean and pure the air was.

“Choukou is a really clean town, somehow. This whole area is pretty and open and not as cluttered as Souun.” She murmured. “I know you said it was a ‘recovering’ town, Myoume, but it seems nicer than the south in some ways. What is it recovering from?”

“Choukou’s legendary for spirit plagues.” Shishi said bluntly, and Aoiketsu shot her an alarmed glance.

“Spirit plagues?” He echoed. “Are you serious?”

“Perfectly.” Shishi nodded her head. “Although they haven’t had one for a long time. So long as Kounan is stable and under Suzaku’s protection, it’s all right. We wouldn’t have come here otherwise.”

“I’d have been able to feel it in the ether from miles away.”

Myoume agreed. "There's no byouma in Choukou now. But Shishi's right. There have been outbreaks of it in this city, and many people have died. Obviously, coupled with the occasional risk of the river flooding, Choukou's probably had trouble attracting trade. But things are picking up. And as you say, Hikari, it's a nice city. It has a peaceful ambience, doesn't it?"

"It really does." Hikari agreed. "I'm glad that things are better now. I don't really know what a spirit plague is, but I don't think I really want to. It sounds pretty icky."

"Yeah. Something like that." Shishi grimaced. "Kashira had a friend — a Suzaku ally, actually — whose woman died of it. Actually, that might've been somewhere round here, come t'think of it. I don't know any other city like Choukou with a history of plagues like that."

"And that's why we've come here, Shishi-chan." Amusement flickered in Myoume's gaze and she gestured across the landscape to where the heavy, leaf-laden branches of an elderly elm tree cast its shadow over two stone markers. Hikari let out an exclamation, darting forward.

"Are those... graves?"

"Yes." Myoume agreed. "That's right."

"But you said Chichiri had a message for you to convey." Aoiketsu looked bewildered, and Myoume laughed, nodding.

"He did." She agreed. "This was where he wanted me to bring it. Can you read the markers, Aoi-kun? I'm sure you can."

"Never mind him. I can read that one." Shishi's eyes opened wide as she flicked a finger in the direction of the nearest slab. "Those are celestial characters. Mitsukake. This is Mitsukake's grave, ain't it? Myou Juan — the guy who I was talking about!"

"Yes, it is. And the one next to him is the woman who died of the byouma — her name was Kaku Shouka." Myoume agreed, kneeling down beside the stones as she brushed the stray leaves off the stone. "Someone still comes here — there are fresh flowers and the stones are bright and clean, except for a few random leaves. I'm glad... and so would Chichiri be."

"So that's why we've come here." Carefully Hikari dropped down beside her Byakko companion, glancing at the graves for a moment, then up at the older girl. "To pay our respects to Mitsukake?"

"Sort of." Myoume sat back on her heels. "Chichiri told me a few

stories about him, because I was interested. And Shishi, I'm sure you know plenty, too. Even though his spirit is no longer here, this grave stands as a memorial to a man who saw peace between Kounan and Kutou even in a time of war."

"Peace?" Aoiketsu started. "What do you mean?"

"Mitsukake died because he sacrificed his life force to heal the war injured." Shishi said soberly. "It didn't matter to him whether they were villagers or soldiers, or even if they wore Kounan's armour or Kutou's. He gave up his own life to heal them. That was his Suzaku power... healing. He was a doctor... it was from him that Chichiri learnt almost all of the medical knowledge he has. But he's always said that Mitsukake knew much, much more."

She sighed, pursing her lips.

"I always think that Chichiri admired him more than anyone else he ever met." She added.

"He really did that?" Hikari hesitated, then reached out to touch the gravestone tentatively. "Mitsukake-san... for everyone? No matter who they were?"

"He's quite a symbol, isn't he, when you think of that?" Myoume smiled. "Even in the middle of war, even with the enemy all around him — he just saw people hurting. Not the colours or the nationalities."

"But the war didn't end because of him. If it had, I'm sure I would have learnt about it." Aoiketsu objected. "In the end, didn't he die in vain?"

"Do you think so?" Myoume looked pensive. "I don't know. Is it ever in vain, to help save someone or something in pain, Aoi-kun? Even if it seems hopeless?"

"I..." Aoiketsu looked stricken, and he bit his lip. Shishi frowned.

"I don't see why exactly we came here." She admitted. "I mean, Mitsukake was a kickass Seishi, no kidding. He saved Kashira's life the once, too. But... he's dead. He's gone. His spirit was reborn. Why come here now?"

Myoume was silent for a moment. Then she sighed.

"Kounan are not at war now." She said softly. "Nor are Hokkan or Sairou. Kutou fights a war only within its own borders. What we do is dangerous... the relationship between Kutou and Kounan is already tentative and the wrong move could ignite conflict on either side. I

brought you people here because I want you to understand we're not here to cause a war. We're not here to hurt or destroy the people in the East... that's not why we're doing this. We're more like Mitsukake... we're here to heal. Not hurt. No matter what the cost... we're looking to save lives. Not end them. Do you understand?"

Her gaze flitted to Shishi.

"You hate my brother and you wish someone would kill him, but individual revenge isn't going to resolve anything." She added. "Aoi-kun, you have your own reasons for having left your homeland — but if there was a way to heal its wounds, perhaps you could go home. And Hikari... Hikari..."

She reached out to touch Hikari's cheek, and Hikari eyed her in confusion.

"What about me?"

"You are the greatest hope for any of us." Myoume murmured. "Do you understand what I'm saying to you? All of you? I wanted you to see Mitsukake's memorial and understand that the man who was buried here was not a killer, or a fighter, or the kind of soul who sought to cause others harm. He was a Celestial Warrior by promoting peace, healing and gentleness. And I don't think he sacrificed his life in vain. To die to preserve life... that's never a pointless death."

"Just like Jin." Shishi whispered, and Myoume smiled.

"Yes. I suppose you can see Jin's sacrifice that way too." She agreed. "Since he did it to protect you and Hikari and to help this world, ultimately, to survive."

Aoiketsu was silent for a moment. Then,

"Myoume-san, do you truly believe that some force in Kutou will try to wipe out life in this world?" He asked softly. Myoume looked grave, nodding her head.

"I am certain." She agreed. "And that something devastating is coming... yes, Aoi. Something in your homeland... for better or worse, is our enemy. It's far greater than my brother's antics with poisoned weaponry. It's something dark and evil — and it will wipe out all life in the ShijinTenchishou if we don't find a way to stop it. A way to... heal it."

Aoiketsu's expression became grave, and he said no more. Instead he got to his feet, walking slowly away from the grave.

"Aoi!" Hikari exclaimed, but Myoume grasped her by the arm,

shaking her head.

“Let him.” She murmured. “Even though Aoi is in Kounan, Hikari, he’s still from the East. And he still has pride. Whatever his situation — to know that something like that could be brought about by a compatriot...”

“He’s too stuck on that blue-blooded noble nonsense.” Shishi said frankly. “But I guess it does suck some. I mean, it doesn’t matter to us. It ain’t our country. Even if there are nutjobs who killed his family and stuff — I guess I’d feel a bit shit about it, if it was Kounan behind this.”

“I think it’s a lot more complicated than that.” Myoume sighed. “But still... I wanted you to both see Mitsukake’s grave. Hikari, so you know that what you do here is important... that those who fought and died for Kounan’s peace are still counting on you to take on their mantle and I believe you can — I know you can. And Shishi... I suppose, to help you understand a little more about our end goal. That you have to let your personal feelings aside for the time being. Even if you are still hurting. Till we get back to Kounan... do you understand?”

“I’d already made up my mind to that.” Shishi said quietly. “At least, for now. Jin’d want it from me. And I’m not going to go after Miramu, much as I’d like to. Papa’d never forgive me if I got myself killed trying to get revenge. But also, I don’t think he’d forgive me if somehow I managed to kill Miramu. I think if anyone’s going to kill that guy... sorry, Myoume, but I think the Kashira would like to be the one to do it himself.”

“He won’t.” Myoume got to her feet, pulling her companions up with her. “At least, not while I’m here. The day my brother and I face one another will come, and one of us will die. Until he’s killed me, Miramu’s own death can’t come to be.”

“Is that why he’s putting off meeting you?” Hikari’s eyes widened in dismay, and Myoume shrugged.

“Probably.” She agreed. “So long as my prophesy hasn’t come true, his existence is assured. Until we’ve fought, he can’t die from any other means — because its fated, I don’t think it can be changed. And I won’t kill him. He must know that. So while I have some time, I’ll do all I can to fix things. I don’t think I can avoid meeting him forever... but it gives me a little leeway at least.”

“We won’t let Miramu kill you, you know.” Shishi said quietly, and Myoume shook her head, a humourless smile touching her lips.

“It’s already decided.” She murmured. “So there’s no sense in worrying about it. Besides, I told Tasuki I’d die for Kounan, if need be. It might be that I die for the South and the West, in the end. But I’m going to do Byakko’s work to the best of my ability until I die.”

“Shishi’s right. We’re not going to let him.” Hikari said firmly. “Not after what happened to Jin. After all, we’d be pretty bad friends to you if we just stood back and let it happen, wouldn’t we?”

“And I’d be breaking my promise if I let anything happen to either one of you as a result.” Myoume said matter-of-factly. “It’s not something that we need to worry about right now, anyway.”

“Don’t you have *any* hopes for the future?” Shishi demanded. “You spent your damn life seeing horrible shit an’ then shutting yourself in the cave. Didn’t you ever see anything in any of this that wasn’t people dyin’ and stuff?”

Myoume was silent for a moment. Then she shrugged.

“It’s hard to know what anything means until I get closer to its happening.” She admitted. “So I don’t really know how to answer that. I’ve seen so many pictures that sometimes it’s hard to separate them from memories. The future and the past mingle together — mine and other people’s. It’s a bit messy.”

“Shishi’s right, though.” Hikari said. “In all of this — wasn’t there anything you saw that made you happy or hopeful?”

Myoume chewed on her lip.

“When I first saw you, Hikari. That made me hopeful.” She said at length. “That this world might be saved.”

“Idiot. She means something other than that.” Shishi grimaced. “Shit, Myoume, don’t you want a life of your own, too? Kashira an’ Chichiri did it. Tamahome too. Amiboshi has a family in the North. Why the hell are you so set on dying? It isn’t a joke, you know. After what happened to Jin — you shouldn’t be so damn casual about your life. An’ I damn well don’t want to see another ally die.”

“Even if we pursue this path for peace, other lives will be lost. I already know that — even if I don’t know when, where or who with any clarity.” Myoume sighed, rubbing her temples. “Allies, enemies... all of it blurs in my mind. The things I don’t know make the things I do know more sinister. Like I said, it’s hard to be clear what means what until it’s right in front of me. Although...”

“Although...?” Hikari pressed, and Myoume looked rueful.

“When I was a small girl, I did have one vision that I’ve never explained.” She admitted, leaning up against the old elm as she considered. “I stopped having it, after Miramu left home. I was swamped by other things, so I pushed it out of my mind. When I was small, after all, most of the visions I had were minor ones. Or ones that made no sense until a lot later. Most of them have been straightened out now. This one hasn’t... but I don’t know if it was truly a vision. It might have been just a dream. It’s hard to tell.”

“But it was what... a happy dream?”

“I suppose. It wasn’t a sad one.” Myoume reflected.

“And?” Shishi demanded. Myoume smiled.

“It was a man on a white horse.” She said softly. “Surrounded by water. I never saw his face. But he was always there, as if... waiting for me.”

“A man, huh?” Hikari’s eyes lit up with interest. “There, you see? You aren’t going to die. You’re going to meet this guy and fall in love with him. Aren’t you? That’s what it means. Right? He’s your secret soul-mate. Was he handsome? I bet he was. A knight on his steed... I bet he was really, really handsome, right?”

“You got all that just from what she said?” Shishi looked incredulous. “She already said she couldn’t see his face, idiot. Shit, you’re crushin’ on Aoi more than I thought. Your brain’s gone into delusions.”

“Shut up.” Hikari coloured. “This is Myoume’s dream. Not mine. What else happened in it, Myoume?”

“Nothing.” Myoume shrugged. “That was it. A man on a white horse, surrounded by water. He gave me a good feeling — a safe feeling. A feeling that if I knew him, he’d be someone I could trust. Someone who would see beyond my celestial mark and understand who I was. Not Toroki, but Myoume. I think... that’s what I liked about him. Even though I couldn’t see his face, it didn’t matter. I could see his heart.”

“That’s really romantic, you know.” Hikari said frankly. “And it just proves what I said. That you’re not going to die. You’re going to meet this guy instead. To hell with Miramu. It’s not going to happen like that.”

“That vision is far stronger than a vague image of someone I may never even find.” Myoume shook her head. “I don’t know his name or what he looks like. When I saw him, he was dressed... differently. I’ve

never seen anyone wearing that kind of clothing before. And I have no idea what I'm seeking. All I have are that vague image and two kanji... the characters for 'man' and 'peace'. That's all. Nothing more."

"Man and peace." Shishi frowned. "Your dreams are weird. You saw kanji with Jin as well, didn't you? That's real messed up."

"I drew them in the sand at home before I could even read or write. Mother had to tell me what they meant." Myoume said wistfully, a nostalgic glitter entering her seiran eyes. "And Miramu... he thought it was funny. He teased me — like you are. That the characters were some guy's name — some guy who'd ride into the village and sweep me off my feet. But I told him he was an idiot — because there was nowhere like that in Sairou."

"Perhaps not in Sairou, but he could be in Kounan." Hikari suggested. "And the characters could be his name... right? Come to think of it, there's a guy in my class at school whose name is Toshio-kun. I think he spells his name with those characters. I wonder if that would work here, too — could Toshio be a name in China too? Or... um..."

She paused to glance across the grass to where Aoiketsu was standing apart, raising her voice as she did so.

"Hey, Aoi! What names could you make out of the characters for 'man' and 'peace'?"

"Huh?" Aoiketsu turned, casting her a bemused look as he sauntered back to join them. 'Man' and "peace?"

"Never mind. Hiki's gone daffy." Shishi told him ruefully. "She's trying to figure out the name of the man Myoume saw in a vision, that's all. She thinks this guy's Myoume's soul-mate... or something."

"Well, it's possible." Hikari said stubbornly. She sighed, glancing down at the ground.

"And I like that idea better than the other one." She added softly. "I don't want you to die, Myoume. So if this guy existed... then you'd have a reason why you'd still be alive, after all of this. And that... that's better."

"Hikari." Myoume rested a hand on her friend's shoulder, shooting her a smile. "You really are a kind person, you know that?"

"Not really." Hikari pinkened. "It's selfish too. I mean... I don't like losing people. And you're my friend."

"I think I missed a whole chapter or two here." Aoiketsu's gaze

flitted between the girls for a moment, then he spread his hands. "Where did the kanji come in?"

"Don't worry about it." Shishi said evenly. "It's not that important."

"Right now, it isn't." Myoume agreed. "We've far too much to do than try to figure out some vision that hasn't pressed on my senses for a long time. Whatever it means, right now it can wait till we've got to Hokkan."

"So we're going back to the inn to get the horses now?" Aoiketsu asked, and Myoume nodded.

"I think so." She agreed.

"Are you all right, Aoi? You seem really serious all of a sudden." Hikari hazarded. Aoiketsu started, then sighed, shaking his head.

"Myoume's words hit things home a little, how badly everything has gone in Kutou." He said sadly. Hikari frowned.

"I'm sorry." She said softly, but Aoiketsu shook his head.

"It's not your fault." He said quietly. "Don't apologise for something you cannot help, Hikari... this is an evil that does not concern you."

"But it will... if we continue to Hokkan, we'll probably cross paths with Eastern soldiers." Myoume said frankly. "If possible, I'd like to avoid engaging any of them in conflict. If we can find and retrieve the Shinzahou and the relic before they locate them, so much to the better."

"I don't want to fight them either." Aoiketsu said evenly, and Shishi snorted.

"We really should teach you how to at least defend yourself, you know." She remarked, and Aoiketsu sent her a pensive glance.

"I don't think it would do any good." He said frankly. "You shouldn't waste your time."

"We all have our own jobs to do on this trip, Shishi-chan." Myoume said softly, and Shishi nodded.

"I know." She admitted. "But I guess... after yesterday..."

She faltered, and Aoiketsu shot her a rueful look.

"You told me to forget last night's conversation." He reminded her lightly. "Now you're the one bringing it up."

"What exactly did you say to him last night, Shishi?" Myoume

asked curiously, and Shishi shook her head.

“Stuff. It doesn’t matter what.” She said evasively, and Hikari reddened as she caught Aoiketsu’s eye.

“I’m sorry, Aoi.” She said softly. “It’s sort of my fault anyway, I think. But Shishi’s right — it’s better if you... forget anything she said to you.”

Aoiketsu stared at her for a moment, and Hikari could see a mixture of things flitting through his odd seiran eyes. Realisation, dismay, confusion, and relief all competed for dominance in his expression, and at length he sighed, nodding his head.

“This journey is complicated enough, you mean.” He murmured. “I am content if we are all just able to travel on without conflict. If that’s the end result — then so be it.”

“Then its settled.” Shishi looked relieved. “And we should get the horses and ride on.”

“Is it... okay for me to ride with you today, Aoi?” Hikari asked hesitantly, and Aoiketsu nodded, offering her a smile.

“I said it would be, at any time.” He reminded her. “Why would today be different?”

“Because of... you know... what Shishi said.”

“But I’ve been told to forget about that. Twice, now, in fact.” Aoiketsu said evenly. “Haven’t I?”

“I suppose so.” Hikari pinkened, and as if reading her thoughts, Myoume laughed.

“Shishi, you and I should go on ahead and make sure the animals are ready to go.” She said wisely. “These two are hopeless enough to forget something — we ought to give them a head-start.”

“But...” Shishi faltered, then she nodded her head. “All right. I suppose so.”

As she watched her two friends hurry down the hill, Hikari could not conceal her blushes any longer, and she sent Aoiketsu a troubled glance.

“Awkward of them, isn’t it.” She murmured. “I’m sorry, Aoi. I don’t know... what they’re trying to achieve, but...”

She faltered, and Aoiketsu sighed.

“I think they intend us to talk about something.” He hazarded.

“Even though they keep saying not to, it’s fairly obvious that they think there’s something we should settle between us.”

“No — I think it’s me.” Hikari grimaced. “Because I’m... a little all over the place.”

She hesitated, then,

“Shishi told me what she did. I mean, what it was she yelled at you.” She began self-consciously. “I wanted to say I was sorry... because I... was thinking beyond what we’re here to do. And it’s stupid. But I... I do like you, Aoi. I like you a lot. I don’t think you’re hopeless or that you’re weak. You’ve helped me to overcome my fear of horses, and I don’t mind riding with you — I’m not dreading it today. But I don’t... want things... to be awkward between us. Because I didn’t come to Kounan to complicate things by being adolescent.”

Aoiketsu sighed, and for a brief instant Hikari had the impression the world was on his shoulders.

“I like you too.” He said at length. “More than I should, in my position. We are both fools, it seems.”

“I guess we are.” Hikari glanced at her hands, trying to suppress the flicker of disappointment in her heart. “I’m just... sorry it got messy like that. Shishi was cross with me last night, but we sorted it out. And I wasn’t going to talk to you about this — but... now... well, it’s awkward not to at least try and explain it. If I even can.”

“Hikari...” Aoiketsu hesitated, then he reached up to touch her cheek.

“You and I are strangers yet.” He murmured, and Hikari was startled by the pain in his gentle, cultured tones. “But if we were not to be — if we were in another situation...”

He stopped, then shook his head, as if trying to clear it.

“You are unlike anyone I have ever met, though I have not had much experience with women before I encountered you and your companions.” He admitted, lowering his hand back to his side. “Your kindness to me has made me fonder of you than logic dictates I should be. But there is too much danger in it. And truly, if you think I am a good person, then that is simply proof that you don’t know me at all.”

“You’re confusing me.” Hikari frowned, and Aoiketsu opened his mouth as if to explain, then he paused.

“That’s what I mean.” He said levelly. “We’ve known one another a

brief time. It's too soon to think of anything beyond the immediate concern of this quest. And of staying alive long enough to see it out."

"Yes." Hikari admitted slowly. "That's true. But Myoume said... she said it was predestined, for us to meet. Somehow... I don't know how. But that we were always going to, in some way or another. I don't totally understand it, and nor did she, completely. But she said that it was that way. Even though you were born in Kutou, and even though I'm from... Tokyo..."

She pinkened, realising she had almost said 'the real world', and Aoiketsu's eyes became troubled.

"Perhaps." He murmured. "But it does not follow that our meeting must be a good thing."

He turned towards the city.

"We should hurry. We're losing sight of them." He added. "And Shishi is not a patient person. She seems to be treating me with less contempt this morning — I don't wish to strain our new accord by tarrying here."

Before she could say anything else, he was gone ahead of her, and Hikari frowned, gathering her composure as she headed after him.

"Was that a 'yes, I like you' conversation or a 'sorry, I don't feel that way' one?" She wondered, as she scrambled down the uneven stony path towards the city limits. "Men are so confusing. I thought he sounded like he felt something too — but all that... about not being a good person... what did *that* mean? I guess we are strangers — but it was like he was saying things and he didn't want to be saying them."

She faltered, reaching up to touch her cheek. She flushed red as she remembered his gentle touch.

"That wasn't the touch of someone who didn't care." She decided. "But then he... pulled away."

She sighed, shaking her head in frustration.

"This is pointless." She decided. "But I can't help dwelling on it. I guess I am adolescent — it's stupid, and so am I, but I have a crush and I can't pretend I don't. Shishi bringing it out into the open has made me more conscious of it, not less. And what Myoume said — but I suppose we do only just know one another. I wish Aoi spoke as plainly as Jin did about things, though. He's harder to figure out that way... like he's used to keeping his thoughts to himself. I can't read him so easily... it's frustrating."

She sighed, pausing to cast a glance back at the elm tree, its heavy branches swaying ponderously in the wind.

“I’m distracted. I’m sorry, Mitsukake-san. We didn’t come here for this, and you don’t care about some silly teenage girl’s feelings.” She said aloud. “I’ll try to put it out of my head, at least for now. I’m just confused, that’s all. I’ll get a hold of it and work it out. And I won’t let Suzaku down.”

She offered a faint, rueful smile.

“Father would be glad I came here, I think. Mother too, since they can’t.” She added. “I’ll try and be a good replacement for them somehow, I promise. Even if I’m not as strong as they were — I’ll try.”

“Well, and what’s a pretty girl like you doing all alone in a place like this?”

The soft voice startled her and she swung back towards the city, realising she had reached the perimeter, but that Aoiketsu, Shishi and Myoume were no longer in her line of sight. Instead a burly, heavy-set man had lumbered into view, an unwelcoming leer on his pudgy, pug-nosed features as he peered at her.

Despite herself, Hikari took a step back, and the man laughed.

“Now, now... don’t be shy.” He said softly, a slightly menacing note in his tones as he held out his hands towards her. “I just want to be friends. That’s all. *Good* friends... you seem like the kind of person I’ve been looking for.”

“Get away from me.” Hikari shook her head, and the man’s smile widened. He raised his hand, and suddenly Hikari was aware of two other thugs lumbering out from the shadows, each one as burly as their captain, the numerous scars on their arms and cheeks indicating that they had survived their fair share of skirmishes. Despite herself she swallowed hard, and the leader nodded.

“Walking alone in this part of town is dangerous, and making a quick profit is a Choukou survival skill.” He said softly. “They pay good money in the East for slaves and courtesans, if you know who to speak to. Make it easy on yourself, girlie — and we won’t hurt you. Much.”

“Slaves and...” Hikari’s eyes widened, and the man nodded.

“We’re slave traders, honey.” He murmured. “And you’re our latest catch.”

Chapter 10

Chapter Nine

The sun was already climbing over Touran as the Kutou party of travellers prepared to leave their inn base and venture out into the crisp, cool northern air. As Hyoushin regarded them, he felt once again that he missed Aoiketsu and Maichu's steady, loyal presence among his team. Somehow, he mused, everything seemed a little more on edge among his men than usual, and he was sure that it was Kayu's own jittery demeanour that had created the ripples. Despite their conversation, he was perceptive enough to know something was still troubling his impressionable young protégée and he sighed inwardly, suspecting that — not for the first time — Kikei had been acting to make his job more difficult.

"No doubt that priest painted some horror story to the boy about Koku Maru's fate in the south." He murmured. "And because that province borders Kounan, Kayu is worried about the prophesy from Toroki. We know, after all, that she is working for Kounan — the connections are far from tenuous and it is not impossible to suppose Captain Koku's men were ambushed by rebels with Suzaku's sympathy. Although why Kounan would care enough to involve themselves in our struggles at present I don't know. Still, they do seek to deny us the Shinzahou. So I suppose I must consider all possibilities."

Toroki's words flitted through his head briefly, and he frowned.

"Or perhaps it is what he *cannot* ask me." He reasoned. "A man of tribal birth will betray his Emperor. Those words do trouble me, as does the fact Kayu will not voice them. He has a healthy imagination and he does not know all of the facts. I am an obvious choice for such suspicions to fall on... perhaps that is his true concern, after all. I can imagine that if this is so, Kikei would not hesitate to encourage it. He does, after all, seek to be rid of me."

His gaze narrowed.

"Come to think of it, *Kikei* is Hin." He realised. "And he keeps that fact a close guarded secret. Perhaps that is something I should pay closer attention to. *If* I believe the words of a woman in Suzaku's pay — therein lies my problem. I cannot be assured of her authenticity, yet I cannot either trust my Lord Priest or his assassin counterpart.

And I must act with care, in case I put my Emperor's life in jeopardy by voicing my suspicions. Still, Kayu will stand further scrutiny... I do not want the boy dragged into something that he will not be able to control."

"Hyoushin-sama, we're all here." Bouri's voice broke through his thoughts and he turned, acknowledging the man's salute with a faint, droll smile.

"So I see." He murmured. "And in good time too. So much the better."

His gaze flitted between the soldiers and the mages, then he nodded.

"I believe this idea to be the best one." He added. "Kayu, I wish you and Ouno to scout the northern side of the city. Kitora will accompany you — I think it is better our two mages are divided. Bouri and Jakou, you will go with Suiko and tackle the south."

"But I want to go with *you*, Hyoushin." Suiko folded her arms petulantly, a pout touching her pretty features. "I don't want to be stuck with some stupid, hairy soldiers."

"I have no need of you." Hyoushin's gaze flickered faintly with annoyance. "You would be better served staying with them. After all, your job is to protect Seiryuu's interests. These are the instructions of the man who holds the Seiryuu Shinzahou in his grasp. I do not wish to argue with you — you will go with Bouri and Jakou or you will remain here. But I am not going to pander to the whims of a temperamental mage."

His gaze flitted to Kitora.

"Well?" He asked softly. "Have *you* no objections to raise, Mage of Byakko?"

"*I'm* not the clingy type." Kitora snorted, shaking her head as she absently flexed her clawed hands. She brushed the tips against Kayu's arm, uttering a noise that sounded distinctly like a purr. "Besides, I *like* this one. I'd rather stay with him than you."

"Stop it." Kayu flinched back, casting the mage a dismayed glance. "You're a witch, like Suiko is — stop touching me with those animal nails of yours!"

"A cat doesn't always show her true claws, Kayu-chan." Kitora said, amused. "Be a good boy, or you'll see what I mean."

She widened her gold, feline eyes at his evident hesitation.

“What’s the matter? Don’t you *trust* me?”

There was a distinct roll to her r’s as she asked this question, and Kayu shot Hyoushin a doubtful look.

“*Must* she come with us, sir?” He asked hesitantly. “Ouno and I are quite capable of surveying the city alone.”

“I am not sending Kitora with you because I doubt your capability, Kayu.” Hyoushin shook his head. “Quite the opposite... I am relying on the pair of you to keep an eye on her actions.”

“Babysitting again.” Kitora muttered, and Hyoushin frowned, remembering the similar attitude Miramu had displayed in Sairou’s mountains about such supervision.

“I wish I understood more the influence of blood in the raising of the mages.” He told himself darkly. “That woman has an element of his spirit twisted up in her magic, and I would do well to watch her. Perhaps she has taken memories with the blood — and I don’t believe all of her threats are made in jest.”

“My decision is final.” Was all he said aloud, however. “This is how it will be.”

“You like giving orders.” Kitora put her index finger to her lips, licking the tip of her nail thoughtfully as she regarded him. “You have a lot of confidence in your silly Emperor and his decisions, don’t you? It’s almost quaint, to see you doing his dirty work like this, while he sits at home in his palace and lets you put your life in danger on his account. I wonder, are all military men in Kutou quite as stupid as you are, Hyoushin?”

“Hyoushin isn’t stupid!” Before Hyoushin could counter the remark, Suiko had sprung forwards, blue eyes blazing indignantly as azure energy flickered from her aura. “And you shut up about Kutou! You’re just a dirty desert cat and you should learn to shut your mouth!”

“There will be no more of this.” Hyoushin put up his hands. “We will disperse, now, and I want you to find out whatever you can — no matter how little. We’ll reconvene here this evening, at sundown. I trust one among you may have unearthed some truth by then.”

“Where will you be, Hyoushin-sama?” Jakou asked. “If we need to reach you, how will we do that?”

“You may leave a message here.” Hyoushin said briskly. “This seems the best place — but be careful in your wording. As for my own errand — I would much like to see the Genbu memorial a second time

and fully appreciate its words. As I am the only one able to read it, it seems logical that I be the one to go there, and I do not need accompaniment to carry out such a task. I will be in the centre of Touran, I imagine... if you should desperately need to find me. Although I am sure that you are all responsible enough not to need me to hold your hands.”

He eyed them, then,

“Dismissed.” He murmured. “Till this evening — good luck.”

Slowly the soldiers dispersed, Kitora trotting playfully after an uncomfortable Kayu. Soon there was only Hyoushin and Suiko left, and the Meihi frowned, shaking his head.

“You are staying here, then?” He asked softly. Suiko paused. Then she shrugged.

“If it’s an order from the Emperor, I have to go with your stupid, boring soldiers. But I’m not interested in snake-turtle treasure.” She said frankly.

“I don’t believe it’s a matter of interest, Suiko.” Hyoushin said tiredly. “And we do not have time to waste. We do not know if Suzaku’s people are in Touran also — and we have not yet had word from Maichu or Aoiketsu as to their progress. Therefore...”

“You worry about the wrong things, silly Hyoushin.” Suiko shook her head, pressing a ghostly finger to his lips and he took a step back, eying her warily.

“What are you playing at now?” He demanded, and Suiko frowned.

“You shouldn’t go places by yourself.” She said softly, and Hyoushin’s brows knitted together as he registered the lack of petulance in her tones. He eyed her cautiously.

“Is that a threat?”

“Maybe. But not from me.” Suiko shrugged. “You shouldn’t trust that cat, Hyoushin. She smells of that man’s bad magic. I don’t like her.”

“By that man, you mean Miramu?”

“Yes. Amefuri.” Suiko nodded her head. Hyoushin’s eyes narrowed.

“So you knew all along that that was who he was.” He murmured. “But you didn’t voice it.”

Suiko sighed, frustration in her blue eyes.

“I am Seiryuu’s mage. I don’t care about Byakko’s rubbish.” She said frankly. “It’s not my fault if Kutou’s Emperor does. I’m not interested in Amefuri. And now he’s back in Kutou, so...”

She shrugged.

“But Kitora is a mage.” She added. “That’s different.”

“Different how?” Hyoushin’s eyebrow twitched up at this, and Suiko sighed again.

“You are so stupid.” She said bluntly. “You know nothing about magic at all, do you? Or mages, or beast Gods... or any of that. No wonder everything’s so out of control!”

“Out of... control?” Hyoushin pursed his lips. “In a round-about way, Suiko — are you trying to warn me of something?”

Suiko glanced at her hands.

“I don’t know anything at all, except that Seiryuu should fight for Seiryuu’s interests and that you’re looking for the wrong things among the wrong people.” She whispered. “The one you’re looking for isn’t here. This is a fool’s errand. And you’re in danger so long as you pursue it. This is no longer Seiryuu’s errand, but it’s been tainted by Byakko and something else... something darker that I can’t evade.”

Hyoushin eyed his companion long and hard for a moment, for a brief instant seeing the true, serious mage spirit that had originally been sealed into the scale in the underground shrine. She stood before him, a sober, troubled look in her azure eyes, and he frowned.

“Why do you not speak so seriously to me always?” He asked softly. “Why do you persist in such games, if we are truly on the same side? If you have anxieties, Suiko, why have you not brought them to me before?”

“Because you would not listen.” Suiko sighed, then, “You are the first fool — you and your Emperor. Because of that... I can’t do anything except obey. They control my soul — I have no power to break away from them. I told you — away from the Shinzahou I’m weak. But Kitora is not. She’s different. And that’s why I don’t like her.”

“She’s stronger than you?”

“She was raised by Seishi blood.” Suiko said gravely. “I wasn’t, was I? The priest believes he raised me with his paltry magic, but he’s a fool, too. It was that boy — the one with the blue blood. He was the one who woke me, wasn’t he? His blood in my shrine. His blood on

the seal of my casket.”

“Aoiketsu.” Hyoushin whispered, and Suiko nodded.

“He’s not a Seishi.” She said reproachfully. “And so I’m not strong enough to fight on equal terms with Kitora. She could destroy me, if we fought. And Seiryuu would be cross with me... because that’s not what’s supposed to happen. Mage spirits are supposed to be allies, not enemies. But she is twisted and I am broken. All because you used the wrong blood to wake us.”

Hyoushin was silent for a moment. Then,

“Aoiketsu’s blood.” He murmured. “He has enough strength in his blood to do such a thing?”

“You truly *are* a fool.” Suiko said disparagingly. “You know that better than I do. He inherited his blood from one of the Chosen, didn’t he? One with tremendous power unlike no other. The one who bore the mark of the heart on his brow. Am I wrong?”

“No. You’re not wrong.” Hyoushin shook his head. “And I did know he had broken the seal on your cave. But I didn’t realise the effects were so far reaching.”

“Aoiketsu has a strong soul, but he is not a Seishi and I am only half the strength I should be because of his dilute blood.” Suiko said quietly. “But even so, I’m here to do Seiryuu’s bidding. And you’re always mean to me, Hyoushin. Even though I keep trying to tell you that I’m on your side... you don’t listen to me.”

She pouted, a flicker of the spoiled witch back in her expression.

“Maybe I’m foolish, but I *like* you. You care about Kutou, even though others don’t.” She added. “So you should listen to me more. Even if you are cold and empty to the Gods, Hyoushin. Else it will be dangerous.”

Hyoushin was silent for a moment. Then, slowly, he nodded.

“I have understood what you have said.” He said quietly. “And I will take note of it. For now, Suiko, I wish you to go join Bouri and Jakou. And say nothing to anyone of this conversation.”

“Who else would I tell?” Suiko snorted, shrugging her shoulders. “Don’t be silly.”

She sighed.

“And I’ll go, if you want me to go.” She added. “But you should be careful. This errand is a dangerous one, and the wrong one.”

“I must follow the Emperor’s will... you know that.”

“As must I.” Suiko sighed, spreading her hands in a helpless gesture. “But it doesn’t mean I don’t have senses... and that I can’t feel other things. The girl — the one you sent your blue blood after — she should be the one you seek. I told you that already.”

“Aoiketsu will discover what we need to know about the Hikari girl.” Hyoushin said quietly, and Suiko nodded.

“No doubt.” She agreed. “I just hope... it won’t be too late for Kutou.”

With that she was gone, and Hyoushin bit his lip, despite himself unsettled by the implications in her words.

“Another person whose judgement I have to weigh and assess.” He reflected. “Suiko is so stupid and flighty, and yet... she spoke to me so seriously then. I... I believe what she told me. Aoiketsu’s blood, just as I presumed. Just as the Emperor and I *both* assumed. Yet at a price... even though the Seishi spirit he carries in his veins was the most powerful of Seiryuu’s representatives, Suiko is still compromised. And at the moment, that troubles me... reckless as she is, I would rather trust to her than Kitora for results. I do believe, whatever else she says, that Suiko is committed to Kutou. In her own way, she is an ally.”

He sighed, brushing his fingers against the hilt of his sword as he considered.

“I should head out, however.” He decided. “Even with Suiko’s warnings, I have a task to complete and I am not afraid to be alone. In fact, I prefer to be, when it comes to something relating to my past like this. That plaque is in old script, and I should like to be able to take my time studying it. Besides, I am no weak soldier... I don’t think I can be so easily ambushed.”

With that thought, he made his own way out of the inn, heading up the main street towards the intersection that led to the green and gold plaque. The city was already busy, and despite the bite in the air, there was a glittering sun in the sky. After the dry heat of Sairou’s desert, Hyoushin found that he was glad of the cooler Northern air, and he allowed himself a rueful smile, realising that despite his Eastern birth, he still felt most comfortable in the Hokkan climate.

“I truly am a man of the snows still.” He murmured. “Such an irony, then, that I should be so committed to Kutou’s well-being. No wonder the Father of the Meihi community thought me a refugee... In

some ways it seems madness, when this place is so peaceful and integrated. But... it is not my home. And running away here... would not solve the problems there. So whatever Suiko says — whatever the danger — I will proceed. To obey the Emperor is to help stabilise the country, after all. Anything else is treason, which is a sentiment Kutou needs no more encouragement in raising.”

As he reached this conclusion, a yell followed by an excited shriek cut through his musings and he stopped just in time to prevent two small children from colliding with him headlong. At the sight of him they paused, staring at him with big, interested eyes, and Hyoushin found he was scarcely able to do any more than return their gaze, as startled by their presence as they were by his.

A young boy and girl stood before him — the boy of about eight years and his companion no more than four. But what had struck the Meihi most strongly was the thick waves of silver hair that curled around both children’s faces, and the wide, innocent amethyst eyes that met his with curiosity but not fear. Their pale cheeks were faintly flushed by the exercise and they were robed in the traditional Meihi children’s attire, eachi carefully embroidered with the gentle, precise stitch that had often provided the tribe with materials to barter at market.

Despite himself, he bit his lip, absorbing the sight of such young Meihi innocence thriving in the middle of a busy, bustling capital. Noone paid the children any undue attention, and this natural acceptance cut through to Hyoushin’s battered heart as it sparked flickers of memory deep within him.

“Good morning, Ojisan.”

The young boy piped in, holding his hands out in a traditional Meihi greeting, and his young companion echoed it clumsily, gazing up at the Commander expectantly. Hyoushin hesitated for a moment, then he drew his fingers together in his own greeting gesture.

“Good morning.” He said softly, in the gentle language of the Meihi. “I’m sorry — I very nearly ran into you.”

“You’re not from the village.” The boy eyed him keenly. “And you’re dressed funny. Where are you from, Ojisan?”

“Kutou.” Hyoushin replied. “And you’re right — I’m not from your village. But I am acquainted with your Elder, I think. Why are you so far from the mountain — and all alone?”

“We’re not alone.” The girl shook her head. “Oneesama is with us.

We're getting firewood."

"Then I'll let you continue with your errand." Hyoushin offered them a faint smile, struggling with his composure as he saw a glimmer of his sister's childish, hopeful face in the little girl's eager eyes. "Will you pass my best wishes to your Elder for me? Tell him that Hyoushin of the East wishes him well."

"Hyoushin." The boy stared. "That's a hard name to say, Ojisan."

"Yes... I suppose it is." Hyoushin reflected. "I'm sorry... I have no other name to give you."

"It's all right. It's strange, so we'll remember it." The boy assured him. He raised his hand in a farewell gesture, then, "We'll tell him! Come on, little sister — we haven't time to stand around when there's work to be done!"

With that he grabbed the small girl's hand, pulling her at some speed into the crowd, and Hyoushin found himself left alone. As he gathered the shreds of his composure, he caught sight of his destination and, relieved, he hurried towards it, resting his hand gently against the plaque as he scanned the words anew.

But try as he might they would not lodge in his memory, as all he could see were images of his own young brother and sister the last time he had seen them alive.

"Before everything changed." He murmured, closing his eyes as he fought tooth and nail to recover his wits. "No, I can't think like this now! I hate this place... this is why I do not come to Hokkan. Why this is not my home. Because it makes me remember... seeing Meihi and speaking that way... makes me think of things better forgotten."

He sank down beneath the plaque, glad of his solitude as he buried his head in his hands. Slowly and methodically he forced the slithers of memory back into the recesses of his mind.

"Yet tomorrow I must go to the mountain village, and speak to the Meihi there." He murmured. "On my Emperor's errand, there is nowhere I can avoid. I did not tell him the last time of the Meihi settlement — perhaps if I had, he would not have ordered me to go there. But even so, I must... no matter what I feel about it. Meihi have existed in Hokkan since before the time of Okuda Takiko and the Genbu Shichi Seishi... and that mountain once housed Genbu's holy treasure. If the Meihi there know something about it — I must not hesitate to find out!"

“Why are we here, Kayu?”

Not far from the Genbu plaque, Ouno cast Kayu a doubtful glance, a quizzical look in his wild brown eyes. “The Commander didn’t tell us to cross this closely to his path — and why are we hiding here when he’s only over there?”

“He doesn’t look like he wants company.” Kayu said softly, a troubled expression on his face. “I wanted to... doublecheck something about the instruction he gave us. But he... seems to want to be alone.”

He bit his lip, then,

“Ouno-kun, I’ve never seen the Commander look shaken up before.” He whispered. “But look at him... look at him.”

“That man is an idiot.” Kitora leant back against the wall of the building, folding her arms across her chest. “You shouldn’t listen to him. He doesn’t even know how to listen to himself.”

“What are you talking about?” Kayu demanded, and Kitora chuckled.

“This is Hokkan.” She said derisively. “This is where he should be. Not in Kutou. He’s one of the ghost people from the northern mountains... he should remember that and stay where he belongs.”

“We could say the same about you.” Ouno muttered, giving the mage a distinctly wary glance. “*You’re* from Sairou. Besides, the Commander was born in Kutou. He’s Eastern, just like we are. That’s why he’s our Commander... why he’s working for Kutou’s Emperor, not Hokkan’s.”

“Really.” Kitora purred softly. “Well, either way, he doesn’t look capable of leading *anything* right at the moment. He looks rather more like he’s about to lose his wits... don’t you think so?”

“Shut up, unless you have something useful to say.” Ouno snapped, but Kayu did not respond, his gaze flitting back to the Meihi officer.

“He wanted to go alone.” He reflected to himself. “And alone, if he was betraying our Emperor... that would be the time for him to do it. But... I didn’t expect...”

He chewed down on his lip harder, tasting blood on his tongue as he once more absorbed the huddled figure of the Meihi Commander sitting on the stone steps beneath the Genbu plaque. Despite her catty tone, he had to admit that Kitora was right.

“Those children said something to him that upset him.” He murmured aloud. “But what could children do or say to upset a man like the Commander?”

“Nothing upsets the Commander.” Ouno said frankly, and Kayu nodded.

“Right.” He said softly. “So how do you explain *that*?”

“Should we go over?” Ouno asked hesitantly, and Kayu snorted.

“Don’t be an idiot.” He snapped. “Of course not. Not even Aoi would get away with approaching the Commander in this state. We should head back to the northern perimeter of the city and I’ll just have to forget asking him how far south we’re supposed to come. We’ll just do our best to work it out... I don’t want to talk to him right now and you’d be nuts to want to, either.”

“No kidding.” Ouno sounded relieved. “We’ll go, then. And we won’t talk about this — okay? Hyoushin-sama’s supposed to be legendary when his temper’s aroused — and I don’t want to see it.”

“Me either.” Kayu acknowledged. “If he can decapitate men with one swing of a sword when he’s angry, I don’t really want to be in the vicinity when he loses his temper. Come on, Ouno. You too, Kitora. And you keep your mouth shut too, okay?”

“I wouldn’t dream of saying anything.” Kitora shrugged her shoulders. “It’s nothing but amusement for me, how you silly Eastern people behave. I don’t care who kills who, in the end — but it’s more interesting to keep things a secret. Isn’t it, Kayu-kun?”

Kayu eyed her sharply, and Kitora offered him a sweet smile.

“Well?” She purred. “Lead the way.”

Kayu frowned, his eyes narrowing as he took in her expression. Slowly he nodded.

“We’ll find out something about Genbu’s treasure, then we can leave this place and go home.” He said quietly. “I’m getting fed up of visiting other lands like this, anyway. Once we’ve got that Shinzahou, we can at least get away from all this cold, horrible weather. And by that time, Maichu and Aoi might’ve scalped the South for their treasure, too.”

He cast a last glance back at Hyoushin, then nodded.

“We’ll find out.” He repeated. “To the northern gate... come on!”

“You know, this must be our lucky day.”

In the suburbs of Choukou, time seemed to have stopped still for Hikari as the trader leered at her, folding his arms across his barrel chest as he ran his gaze over her entire body. “You’re cute enough to catch attention — and I know a few people in the East who’ll pay a pretty penny for a young girl like you.”

His smile widened, and Hikari felt faintly queasy as she saw the trader’s blackened, rotting teeth.

“I’ll bet you’re even still a virgin.” He murmured. “Even better.”

“Get away from me!” Hikari exclaimed, pulling Hotohori’s sword from her belt as she held it out before her. “I’ll make you sorry, if you don’t!”

“What’s a little girl like you going to do with a blade like that?” The man snorted, reaching out a meaty fist to knock the weapon from Hikari’s grasp, and in horror she watched the *shinken* clatter to the ground, well out of her reach. She backed up against the wall, inwardly wishing that Shishi or Myoume would return, but knowing that rescue was unlikely. She swallowed hard, closing her eyes as the man loomed nearer, expecting to feel his thick fingers digging into her shoulders at any moment.

But it did not come.

Instead there was a shout from behind the gathered thugs and cautiously Hikari opened her eyes, surprise glittering in her hazel gaze as she registered the cause of the interruption. Aoiketsu stood there, a dark, determined silhouette against the midday sun, and Hikari’s heart skipped a beat as she registered his presence.

“Aoi, what are you doing!” She exclaimed. “These guys are trouble — run! Find Myoume, find Shishi! It’s not safe!”

Aoiketsu did not respond, and Hikari half-wondered if he had even heard her. His seiran eyes were fixed on the leader of the slave traders, and there was a strange coldness glittering in their depths that Hikari had not seen there before. His expression, which so often was pensive or thoughtful when they had talked of his home and his family was now fixed in a look of resolution, and Hikari bit her lip, wondering what it meant.

For a moment, there was silence. Then, Aoiketsu spoke.

“Leave her alone.” He said softly, his tones just loud enough to carry across the barren ground.

The leader of the thugs turned away from Hikari, glaring at Aoiketsu with his piggish eyes.

“What are you going to do about it, pretty-boy?” He asked derisively. “I could snap you in half like a twig... would you like that? Your girlfriend’s coming with me to Kutou — finders, keepers, and all that. There ain’t nothing a wimp like you can do about it.”

Aoiketsu’s eyes darkened, and Hikari let out a gasp as she saw his gaze dart across the ground to the fallen *shinken*.

“Really?” He murmured. “I wonder about that.”

“Aoi, you idiot, get out of here!” Hikari screamed. “There are three of them, dammit — they’ll hurt you!”

Again, Aoiketsu took no notice of her exclamations. Instead he bent to pick up Hotohori’s sword, glancing at it as he turned it over in his hands. Then he gazed up at the men.

“Now I’m a pretty-boy with a pretty weapon.” He said sarcastically. “Are you scared yet?”

“You’re a waste of my time.” The leader of the bandits snorted. “What are you going to do with that? Style my hair? Pat me on the hand and tell me I’ve been a bad boy?”

Aoiketsu’s brows knitted together, and slowly he shook his head, as he passed the weapon into his right hand, his grip tightening around the hilt.

“If you don’t leave Hikari alone, I’m going to kill you.” He said evenly. “*All* of you, if I have to. It’s up to you.”

“*You?* Kill *us?*” The trader snorted. “Don’t make me laugh.”

“I’m not intending to.” Aoiketsu responded quietly, raising the blade before him. “But you seem to do a lot of talking. You can’t be much good at fighting yourself, if you only shoot your mouth off. Can you?”

“Why, you...” The trader’s eyes narrowed, and he gestured to his subordinates, flicking his fingers in Aoiketsu’s direction. As he did so, his other hand clamped firmly around Hikari’s wrist, preventing her from escaping, and as the two heavies advanced on Aoiketsu, she felt her heart freeze in her chest.

“Aoi!” She shrieked. “No! No, don’t kill him! *Don’t kill him!*”

The trader smirked.

“You want me to leave your pretty boyfriend in one piece?” He asked tauntingly. “What will you do for me in return, then, little girl?”

“Stop it, you stupid jerk.” Hikari fought to free herself, but it was to no avail. “Call your men off — leave Aoi alone. And *let me go!*”

Aoiketsu’s gaze darted from one man to the other, then he smiled, raising his hand to indicate for them to advance. As they did so, time seemed to move in slow motion, and Hikari bit her lip, half afraid to watch but unable to look away.

As the first trader drew his blade, however, Aoiketsu seemed to come alive, bringing Hotohori’s *shinken* up to parry it before pushing the weapon back with such force that it went flying from the man’s grip. Before the trader could react, Aoiketsu had brought the flat of the blade down hard on the man’s fat fingers, causing him to roar out in pain as he grabbed his wounded sword hand. Hikari’s eyes widened as Aoiketsu turned his attention to the second man, darting out of the way of his dagger as he feinted and parried each attempt to impale him. Finally, as he seemed to be backed into a corner, Hikari was certain his luck had run out. But instead of panicking or begging for mercy, Aoiketsu merely glanced at the *shinken*, nodding his head as if confirming something to himself. With a deft flick of his wrist he had reversed the weapon, using the hilt as a pommel as he drove the dagger from the second man’s hand. With a yell he launched himself at his enemy, knocking him neatly against the other heavy as their heads collided, sending both staggering and stumbling to the ground.

A strange, satisfied smile touched Aoiketsu’s lips and he nodded again, turning back to the leader of the band, who was staring at him in disbelief. As his grip loosened around her wrist, Hikari pulled herself free, hardly able to believe what she had seen herself.

“Well?” Instead of the gentle, slightly cowardly noble son that she had come to know, a soldier now stood before her, wielding Hotohori’s *shinken* before him as if he had been born with a blade in his hand. Although the blade did not shimmer with Suzaku’s divine energy this time, Hikari suddenly had the impression that it was still a weapon capable of killing. And, from the glitter in Aoiketsu’s seiran eyes, she realised it was an option he was seriously considering.

“Let her go.” He spoke firmly but quietly, and somehow his tones conveyed all the foreboding of a death threat. “I don’t want to spill blood if I can avoid it. Take your jobs and leave us... and I’ll let you live.”

“You’ll...” The thug faltered, despite himself, and Aoiketsu nodded

his head.

“I’ll count to ten.” He said evenly. “And then I’ll attack. And Seiryuu help you if you’re not ready.”

He smiled again, another cool, confident smile.

“Do you fancy your odds against me, one on one?” He added, flexing the sword in the bright sunlight so that it glittered menacingly off the sharp edge of the blade. “Or are you a smart man, who knows when he’s beaten?”

“Who... are you?” Hikari felt the trader pull his fingers away from her skin completely, staring at Aoiketsu uncertainly. “Dressed like that... you fight like...”

He trailed off, shaking his head.

“One. Two. Three.” Aoiketsu began evenly. “Four. Are you going? I’m not bluffing, and I’ll fight if I have to. Five. Six.”

He twitched the blade in the man’s direction again.

“I’m capable of it.” He added warningly. “Seven. Eight.”

At this, the man seemed to lose the last of his confidence, and he stepped away from Hikari, holding up his hands.

“Fine, I’ll find another broad!” He exclaimed. “Shit, you rich types have no sense of humour!”

“Nine.” Aoiketsu said menacingly, and the trader yelped, turning tail and fleeing for the safety of the city beyond. Behind him, his two clumsy, disorientated associates stumbled after him, and before long Hikari and her young companion were left alone.

Hikari rubbed her already bruising arm, sending Aoiketsu a doubtful look.

“Aoi... kun?” She murmured, and Aoiketsu sent her a rueful look, holding out the sword.

“Sorry.” He said frankly. “This is yours, I know. I didn’t ask... but I didn’t want him to hurt you.”

“I...” Hikari took the *shinken* almost automatically from his grip, sliding it back awkwardly into the scabbard. Then she glanced at him, taking a step back as she tried to work out what she had just seen.

“Who are you?” She whispered, and Aoiketsu stared at her, confused.

“Hikari?”

“You... just...” Hikari swallowed hard. “Who *are* you, Aoi? Who are you... really?”

Aoiketsu’s eyes widened, and he muttered a curse under his breath as he suddenly seemed to recall where he was and what he should be doing. At the sound of the unconscious expletive, Hikari’s unease grew, and she took another step away from him.

“Who are you really?” She repeated, her voice barely above a murmur. “Aoi... I... you fought like... but you... I don’t understand.”

“Shit.” Aoiketsu cursed again, burying his head in his hands as he sank back against the wall. “Goddammit, what the hell was I thinking!? Why didn’t I just run for Shishi like you said... dammit, Hikari, why did you let me do that?”

“Why did I *let* you...?” Hikari faltered, staring at him in disbelief, as she realised the gentle formality of his speech had crumbled into more ordinary, everyday language. “I don’t remember you listening to me!”

“I didn’t even think...” Aoiketsu glanced at his fingers, and Hikari’s eyes opened wide as for the first time she noticed the swordsman’s callouses on her companion’s right hand. With an exclamation she grabbed it, holding it up so that she could see it more clearly, and Aoiketsu sent her a bewildered glance.

“Hikari?”

“Just like Jin and Shishi.” Hikari murmured, releasing the hand so it fell back to his side. “I knew it. I knew... that wasn’t a fluke. Dammit, Aoi, tell me the truth! Who the hell *are* you?!”

“Kaiga Aoiketsu.” Aoiketsu responded, and Hikari’s eyes narrowed, tears welling in their depths as she brought her hand quick and sharp across his cheek.

“*Liar!*” She exclaimed. “You’re no such thing!”

“Hikari, stop it!” Aoiketsu stared at her in dismay, his fingers going to his cheek as he took a step back. “Listen to me! It’s not like that!”

“It’s not like what?” Hikari demanded bitterly. “You’re a liar! You’ve pretended you didn’t even know how to hold a sword! When Shishi tried to show you, you kept dropping it like a complete rookie! But you lied! You can fight — dammit, you fight like a... a damn soldier! Even Jin... Even Jin couldn’t fight like you! So tell me the damn truth this time! *Who... are... you!?*”

Aoiketsu sighed, closing his eyes as he composed himself. Then he fingered the ring around his middle finger, pulling it off and holding it up.

“Kaiga Aoiketsu.” He said softly. “This ring is my proof. I am Kaiga Ruiren’s only son — and the one she gave this to, when she died.”

“Stop lying to me!” Hikari was finding it ever more difficult to hold back her tears now. “Stop it! For all I know, you killed the real Kaiga boy and *stole* that from his corpse!”

“I didn’t steal it from anyone.” Indignation glittered in Aoiketsu’s seiran eyes. “And that *is* the truth. Didn’t Chichiri say I had Kaiga Ruiren’s features in my face? I’m her son, Hikari. I swear it on the Dragon of the East. On my own life. On everything. I am Kaiga Aoiketsu.”

Hikari took a deep breath, struggling to calm down as she recalled that he was right — Chichiri had commented on the likeness when the two had first met.

“Fine.” She said at length. “So you’re Kaiga Aoiketsu. You’re the son of the noble family slaughtered by Kutou’s Emperor and his companions. Right?”

“Yes.”

“Then explain something to me!” Hikari brushed her hand roughly against the sleeping *shinken*. “Why did you pretend you didn’t know how to use a sword?”

“I...”

“And dammit, if you’re that damn good you can knock off two idiots like that without breaking a sweat, how is it that Miramu laid you out just by slashing your arm?”

“Because I...”

“Because what?” Hikari snapped. “Because you just happened to forget to tell us you were some kind of sword-fighting whiz-kid?”

“Hiki, what’s all the yelling about?” At that moment Shishi emerged into the deserted street, the reins of her horse and Aoiketsu’s trailing between her fingers as she led the animals forward. “Myoume’s settling up with the innkeeper and we need to be leaving.”

She paused, eying her friends’ expressions, and frowned.

“Shit... are you two having a lover’s tiff? I didn’t think you’d got far enough for that!”

“He just saved my life.” Hikari said darkly, and Shishi frowned, confused.

“Huh?” She demanded. “What’s wrong with that?”

“The fact that he told us he couldn’t damn well fight!” Hikari exclaimed. “But he just beat two huge guys and put the fear of God into a third with Hotohori-sama’s *shinken*! He fights better than Jin, Shishi — I swear it.”

“What?” As the truth sank in, Shishi turned disbelieving bronze eyes on the discomfited Aoiketsu. “Shit — for real?”

“I... I can explain.” Aoiketsu murmured, and Hikari’s eyes narrowed.

“Yes. Explain.” She said flatly. “Tell us how you magically learnt to fight overnight. Or is it Hotohori-sama’s magic, huh? Does he bless every waif and stray from out of Kutou now?”

“No.” Aoiketsu sighed, sinking down onto the ground as he reached up to loose his thick hair, running his fingers through it as he tried to work out the best way to act. “Hikari... please stop yelling at me. It... I don’t like it, when you do. I... you don’t understand.”

He raised his gaze to hers, and Hikari saw genuine anguish in his seiran eyes.

“I’m sorry.” He added. “I don’t even know what to tell you.”

“The truth would be nice.” Shishi said softly, and Hikari was aware of her young friend pulling her weapon from its sheath, tapping it against the ground. “And quickly. Before I make you prove what kind of a fighter you are.”

“One who’d beat you easily enough.” Aoiketsu said honestly, and Shishi bristled, glaring at him.

“What the hell do you mean by that?” She demanded, and Aoiketsu sighed.

“You’re strong and you fight well.” He said evenly. “But you’re not strong enough to beat me in a fight. Not unless... you drew blood.”

“Blood?” Shishi frowned. “So wait — you’re a prize fighter but you’re still a sissy? Why isn’t this making any sense?”

“Because it doesn’t.” Aoiketsu admitted. “But it’s still true.”

“Fine then.” Shishi tossed her sword down on the ground, holding her hand out to Hikari. “Hiki, give me the *shinken*. And you, Aoi, you

take my sword. You ain't fighting me with my Emperor's blade, dammit... but we'll see how good you are."

"No." Aoiketsu made no move to pick up the weapon, shaking his head.

"Why the hell not, dammit?"

"Because I don't want to hurt you." Aoiketsu said evenly. "That's not why I'm here."

"Then why *are* you here?" Hikari asked softly, and Aoiketsu bit his lip.

"It's complicated." He admitted at length, and Shishi's eyes narrowed.

"You're a spy, aren't you?" She said quietly, and from the stricken look in the young man's eyes Hikari knew her friend had hit the truth. She shook her head, the tears spilling onto her cheeks at this.

"A spy?" She whispered. "You mean... you've been... for Kutou?"

Aoiketsu sighed heavily. Slowly he nodded his head.

"Yes."

"And all of this... this pretending to be weak, and to help us... dammit, even that Miramu is trying to kill you... it was all a lie?"

Aoiketsu buried his head in his hands again, nodding wordlessly.

"You bastard." Hikari's voice shook. "Why? *Why* would you?"

"Because I had to." Aoiketsu raised his gaze to hers. "I'm sorry, Hikari. I..."

"I don't want to hear you grovel." Hikari held up her hand, cutting across him. "I don't want to hear more lies from a goddamn spy."

"You *are* working with that jerk who killed Jin, then." Shishi murmured. "Dammit, Aoi, pick up the sword. I'm not going to fight an unarmed man, but shit, I'm not going to let that go."

"I had nothing to do with Jin's death, and Miramu is no ally of mine." Aoiketsu said frankly. "And I'm not going to fight you. If you want to kill me, go ahead. I'm a spy. I've betrayed you. But I'm not going to hurt you. I told you — that's not why I'm here."

"Then why?" Shishi demanded. "Shit, Aoi — *why*?"

"I don't *care* why." Hikari said frankly. "I don't need to know. I'm

going to find Myoume... I don't want to be around him any more."

"Hikari..." Aoiketsu faltered, and despite herself, something in his unusual eyes made the schoolgirl falter.

"Have you any idea how much this hurts?" She whispered. "I trusted you. I... I was falling in love with you, you know. But the man... the person I... he's not even real, is he? He's someone you made up. Kaiga Aoiketsu might be your name... but it isn't who you are. Is it?"

Aoiketsu's expression became one of distress, and he chewed on his lip, fighting emotions of his own.

"I haven't lied about everything." He said softly. "And I... I *was* sent here to spy. I... I won't deny that. But that I became your friend... it wasn't fake, Hikari. I did tell you that... that I wasn't as good a person as you thought I was. And the way I've felt about it... that's not false, either. So... I... I haven't betrayed you. Not how you think I have."

He hesitated, then,

"I know you're Suzaku's Shinzahou, even though you haven't told me." He added quietly. "But I've not reported it back to Kutou. They won't find out from me, who you are. Because I don't want you to be hurt. I'm a traitor to everyone, now. But I... I've promised myself I won't... not since I saw Myoume's vision of the future and what's going to happen in Kutou if the Emperor brings together all four Shinzahou. You... will be hurt. And I can't let that happen."

Hikari's eyes widened with disbelief.

"How the hell did you find *that* out?" She whispered.

"I told him." A fresh voice joined the conversation at that moment, and Hikari wheeled round, shock flooding her features.

"*Myoume*?" She exclaimed. "You told him I was..."

"Shit, Myoume, whose side are you actually on?" Shishi demanded. "Are you really working with that brother of yours after all?"

"Of course I'm not. Don't be foolish." Myoume said frankly. "I told Aoi because he needed to know. That's all."

"And did you know he was spying for Kutou?" Hikari demanded. Myoume nodded.

"Yes." She said evenly. "But it didn't seem to be that important."

"*Not important?*" Shishi's eyes almost fell out of her head, and

Myoume smiled.

“I’ve seen a lot more than you, Shishi-chan.” She said with a shrug. “I knew Aoi was sent here to spy... but I also know the bigger picture. I’m not on Kounan’s side, or Kutou’s side. I’m on the side of survival — that protecting this world is the most important thing. If I’d outed Aoi as a spy when I first knew it, he wouldn’t have been here today to protect Hikari’s life. And I knew he would, because even if he doesn’t fully realise it yet, he’s already too much in love with her to back out of something like that. Because of that, I knew you’d find out his true reason for being here in Kounan. And then the air would be clear, and we could continue.”

“Wait a minute.” Shishi held up her hands. “Am I the only one who has a problem with this guy reporting everything back to his superiors in the East?”

“No. You’re not.” Hikari said flatly. “I don’t like it, either.”

“Spying isn’t an attractive hobby.” Myoume agreed. “But it’s not gone unnoticed. Chichiri and I discussed the situation before we even left Kounan... he’s not been unmonitored.”

“Chichiri... knows about me too?” This seemed to floor Aoiketsu, and Myoume nodded.

“Yes.” She agreed cheerfully. “We had a long discussion about it, and decided that it was better for you to be with us than not.”

“Shit.” Aoiketsu looked stricken. “Does the whole of Kounan know that we’ve... I mean *I’ve* been here?”

“No, but I expect that Chichiri’s spoken to Reizeitei-sama and possibly Tasuki too, by this time.” Myoume said calmly. “And your friends — Hei Kayu and Shi Maichu, I believe — one has left Kounan and the other will not be intercepted while he’s here. You needn’t worry — noone’s going to be killed just because Chichiri and I can sense things in people’s auras that other people cannot.”

“More spies? *Three* of them, not just Aoi?” Shishi demanded. “Why are we letting them go, dammit?”

“I don’t think either of them are of particular interest to Kounan at the moment.” Myoume said levelly. “And they don’t know very much yet. Nothing at all, really... Aoi’s passed on some information, true, but not enough to make any of them a problem for us. To attack them would be risky — considering the delicate peace between the East and the South. No, in this instance, it’s better to let them be.”

She smiled, amusement flickering in her dark blue eyes.

“Besides, Aoi’s not turning out to be a very good agent.” She continued, and Hikari saw colour rise in Aoiketsu’s cheeks. “He’s intelligent and resourceful, but he has a weakness, and that is his kindness. That’s not an act, is it, Aoi-kun? You are genuinely fond of the person you were sent here to find out about. That’s why you instinctively came to her rescue, even though it revealed who you are.”

Her gaze softened.

“I did tell you, didn’t I?” She murmured. “That you would betray yourself before we reached Yukigase. Now maybe you believe me. To fight is your instinct — it’s what you’ve been trained to do since you were a small boy. And Hikari is now someone you want to protect — even if your nationality says you should not. Am I right?”

Slowly Aoiketsu nodded, defeat in his gaze.

“Because of that, he’s not going to betray your secret to Kutou’s Emperor.” Myoume met Hikari’s incredulous glance with a smile.

“Besides, I think Aoi’s come to realise what I already knew — that not everything is well in Kutou’s court. Shishi, you have this view of a negative Eastern Empire with greedy, evil, bandit killers at the helm. But that’s a false impression — a bias placed on you by Jin’s death and by the traditional hostility between Kounan and Kutou. I, on the other hand, am impartial. And I know that Kutou’s Emperor doesn’t act out of hate or spite. Nor does he act out of greed. He seeks only one thing... to bring peace to Kutou in the way it has been brought to the other three lands.”

“But if that’s true, why are we trying to stop him?” Hikari demanded.

“Because there’s someone at his court who can’t be trusted.” Myoume said evenly. “That person is our true enemy. Unfortunately, on this point, Aoi and I disagree. All I know is that it’s a man of tribal birth. No more than that. But whatever the truth — someone is plotting to steal this power for himself. And if he succeeds, this world will die.”

“Shit.” Shishi murmured, then, “Wait a minute. Tribal — you mean that Meihi? That ghost?”

“It’s what’s crossed my mind.” Myoume agreed. “There has to be a reason why he’s so firmly tied into my thought patterns. I can’t work out why my mind and my visions keep pulling me back to him. And

Aoiketsu has admitted himself that he doesn't know of anyone else of tribal blood who's close enough to the Emperor to stage a rebellion of this magnitude."

"It's not him." Aoiketsu said softly. "Stop saying it is, Myoume, when you don't know for sure. *I* know. I don't care what you say — I know. It's *not* Hyoushin-sama. It's someone else."

"So for the record, Aoi, who the hell *are* you, actually?" Shishi demanded. "If it's apparently okay for you to be a spy, and flit around Kounan like this — at least tell us the damn truth before I beat the crap out of you. All right?"

"I'm Kaiga Aoiketsu." Aoiketsu said evenly, and Shishi glanced at Myoume for confirmation. The prophet nodded.

"He is." She agreed. "Kaiga Ruiren is his mother, just as he told us."

"So what do you have to gain from this, then?" Hikari murmured. "If they killed your family..."

"They weren't my family." Aoiketsu glanced up at the sky as if looking for a source of strength. "They were people whose name I carry. That's all. The chances are... no, I'm almost certain now that I'm not Kaiga Gin's son. My mother was probably the one who betrayed them. She was abused and beaten by her husband, and he was cruel and sadistic enough a monster to keep slaves and ritually abuse them, too. Many died through his methods — others suffered things I can't even begin to imagine. Hyoushin-sama... was one of them."

He sighed, twisting his fingers together as he composed himself.

"In the end I guess Mother had had enough." He continued. "So she betrayed him. And when the estate was ravaged, she alone of the noble family survived. But her health was already so wretched from the way she'd had to live, she only had enough strength to bring me into the world. I think... even though I don't know... that maybe she hung on just for that reason. To make sure I was born. And she left this ring for me, because she wanted me to have it. So I knew... I was important to her. And that noone would doubt who I was, if it ever came to a situation where I could benefit. She made the Emperor promise I would be raised as a soldier to defend and protect Kutou — and to help bring an end to the civil war. So I have been, since the day I was born."

Hikari bit her lip, eying him doubtfully.

"Is that true?" She murmured, and Myoume nodded her head.

“Aoi’s story tallies with my own information.” She agreed. “Except for one thing. The truth of your father’s name, Aoi — or do you seek to keep this from Hikari a little longer?”

Aoiketsu’s shot up, dismay in his expression as he met Myoume’s gaze.

“My... father?” He whispered, and Myoume nodded.

“You *do* know his name, after all.” She said quietly. “Don’t you? You can’t be so naïve as that — Aoi-kun, with your knowledge of Kutou and its politics and history, you can’t be ignorant of the name of the one who sired you.”

“I...” Aoiketsu faltered. Then he sighed, spreading his hands.

“I have suspicions.” He murmured. “But they’re no more than that.”

“Why does it matter who his father is?” Hikari frowned, and Aoiketsu looked troubled.

“Since I’m telling the truth, I suppose I’ll continue.” He said with a sigh. “Even though noone has ever told me for sure. I... I should be *Gi* Aoiketsu. I mean, my true name... my father was *Gi Ayuru*. I... think.”

“So he was.” Myoume murmured softly.

“Why should that matter?” Shishi frowned. “So your Ma had an affair — what of it?”

“*Gi Ayuru* had another name, Shishi.” Myoume said evenly. “One you know better... one most of Kounan still equates with terror and destruction.”

“Another name?” Hikari frowned, and Aoiketsu nodded his head.

“*Nakago*.” He said carefully. “Kutou’s legendary Shougun and Seishi. *Nakago*.”

“*Nakago*?” Shishi reacted like she had been shot, and Hikari was scarcely any less stunned. “Shit, is that for real? You... are... that evil bastard is your *father*?”

Aoiketsu nodded.

“And he *wasn’t* evil.” He added. “I mean, I don’t really know, not for sure, what kind of a man he was. But even though he was Kutou’s enemy, he... he did spare my mother. And he did bring down a corrupt regime. Kutou suffers a lot, still. But it suffered more, then.”

He bit his lip, shaking his head as if to clear it.

“Hyoushin-sama was a slave of the Kaiga estate, and Nakago’s army freed him.” He said quietly. “Hyoushin-sama more or less raised me — he taught me how and when to fight, but also how and when not to. When not to cause harm, as well as when there was a need to kill. Which is why I won’t fight you, Shishi... no matter what you do to me. You are not my enemy... you are just someone who happens to come from another land. And that’s not a reason to kill you. Because of Hyoushin-sama, the Imperial army no longer ransacks estates or kills people just because they are different. Kutou has a black history of tribal genocide and clan suspicion, but Hyoushin-sama and Kintsusei-sama seek to eradicate this. That’s why there is still war in Kutou. Because they want to heal it — and people are still resisting. People who want to cling to Shoukitei’s corruption even now — people who Nakago did not manage to get to, before he died.”

He glanced at the floor.

“I came here to help Kutou. Not to hurt Kounan.” He added. “Until I saw Myoume’s prophesy, I didn’t realise that so much was at stake. And... I... I also realised... something else. That if the one who destroys this world is tribal-born... it... could be... me. After all — I’m a traitor too, now.”

“I think that’s unlikely, Aoi-kun.” Myoume said gently. “I’ve seen nothing to suggest that. Quite the opposite — I’ve always known that Nakago’s son would join Suzaku’s fight. And so you have. Today you fought to protect the life of Suzaku no Shinzahu — even though in doing so you may have sacrificed her trust. And even if Hikari doesn’t believe it, Aoi — I know your feelings for her are genuine. You acted impulsively, but on instinct. Whether you are a spy, or you aren’t — thanks to you, Hikari still has her life.”

“I... I guess that *is* true.” Hikari murmured. “You did protect me. But I... all of this... and what about now? Aoi, what have you... what *have* you told them already?”

“Very little.” Aoiketsu admitted. “Only the location of Suzaku’s relic, within Reikaku-zan.”

“*Only*, he says.” Shishi snorted. “That’s my home, you know. My father and mother are there, and Anie. And Jin is buried there. Do you think we want emissaries from the East trying to turn it over, or worse, allying with Kaou-zan to launch an attack? Shit, do you not realise how much we’ve already been through?”

“I’m sorry.” Aoiketsu looked guilty. “I just... I wanted... to help... my country.”

“Which is something you shouldn’t apologise for.” Myoume said gently. “Because at the end of the day, Aoi, I think we *all* want to help Kutou.”

“We do?” Shishi looked startled. “Since when?”

“Kutou is the country in crisis.” Myoume said evenly. “If we help them heal, we help the world heal. Which is why Aoi is here in the first place.”

She reached out a hand to touch the young soldier’s shoulder.

“And why he’s no longer a spy for Kutou.” She added. “But an ally for Suzaku no Shinzahou.”

Chapter 11

Chapter Ten

A fruitless day's search.

Kayu sank down onto the empty seat, uttering a sigh of defeat as he exchanged weary looks with his companions. Despite the fact they were now sat in the inn's warm front chamber, with fires burning merrily in the grates, the cold of the city air still pierced through to his bones and he shivered involuntarily, pulling his cloak more tightly around him.

"Hokkan's a damn big country." Ouno murmured, as if voicing Kayu's own thoughts. "What if this thing isn't even in Touran at all?"

"It's bigger than any of the other lands." Jakou agreed with a sigh, dropping his sword on the table as he took the seat opposite. "You people had no luck either, huh? I wonder if we're right stayin' here — I'm gonna ask the Commander if we're goin' to have to explore the whole of this friggin' country."

"You'd think that Priest would have found some kind of lead." Bouri confirmed. "Kayu, you're tight with Kikei-sama — he didn't give even you a clue?"

"He doesn't know anything, so how could he?" Kayu demanded irritably. "He's tried too — but he's a Priest. He's not a sorcerer and he doesn't practice dark arts... besides, he's *Seiryuu's* Priest. What connection would he have to Genbu, huh?"

"Guess so." Bouri grimaced. "And those damn mage women are useless, too — Suiko-sama spent the entire time moaning about the cold and thawing random puddles into slush when she thought we weren't watchin' her. I almost went flyin' across this one street because of her games."

Kayu's gaze drifted to the *Seiryuu* mage, who had huddled herself in the corner of the chamber away from them, her chin in her hands and a decidedly displeased expression in her bright azure eyes. He sighed.

"Kitora wanted to kill anyone who didn't give us a favourable answer — which was pretty much everyone we met." He responded. "And... God only knows where she is now. Chasing mice, maybe. I

don't know or care... I've had enough of her company."

"She seems to listen to *you*, at least." Ouno pointed out. "She's a creepy witch and I swear if I turn my back on her for a second she'll spike me too. She brought down three or four trees when we were questioning this one guy, just because she was fed up with waiting for us. I don't know why we need mages anyhow — dammit, I wish we'd never brought either of them to life."

"Right." Jakou rubbed his temples. "As soldiers we can handle this. We're trained an' we're less distinctive than those two dames are anyhow. If I was a Hokkan native, I'd take one look at them an' flee."

"Speakin' of fleeing, where do you suppose the Commander is?" Bouri glanced around him, frowning. "Shouldn't he have been back by now?"

"I'm right here, Bouri."

A smooth voice came from behind him, and the soldier visibly jumped, turning to face his impassive leader with a sheepish expression on his face. As ever, Hyoushin had made his entry as silently as possible, and none of the soldiers had been aware that he had been listening to their conversation. At their discomfited looks, the Meihi inclined his head.

"I see from your words and your expressions that you have had no luck." He added. "More's the pity... it seems that you are correct, Ouno. We may have to search further afield."

"I didn't... mean to be rude, sir." Ouno flushed, and Hyoushin spread his hands.

"I do not consider honest sentiments to be rude." He murmured. "More, my concern is how best to carry out a search of vast territory such as this."

He glanced across the chamber to the huddled, sulking Suiko, and a thoughtful look glittered in his violet gaze.

"Suiko, tell me, you are quite sure that one of Seiryuu's warriors still lives, and that he makes his home in the North Country?" He asked softly.

"A Seishi?" Kayu's eyes widened, and Hyoushin nodded.

"Amiboshi, if memory serves me." He agreed. "Suiko — would it be to any purpose to make for his location? You told me earlier that we were seeking things in the wrong place. I would have your counsel, therefore — is there any help that Amiboshi might be able to give us?"

Suiko gazed up at him in surprise, something flickering in her azure eyes. Slowly she shook her head.

“Amiboshi is barely Seiryuu’s Seishi any more.” She murmured. “And not at all Genbu’s. He can’t tell you anything I can’t, Hyoushin. Probably less, in fact... he has turned his back on Kutou and he seeks only to be left alone. I sense his life force, and that it’s strong... but it is not a fighting instinct. I do not think Amiboshi can help us. Even if he did know where Genbu’s treasure was hidden, I don’t believe he would help us find it.”

“You mean he’s a traitor?” Jakou demanded, and Suiko spread her hands.

“He has helped one more powerful than you and your silly friends.” She said frankly, and Hyoushin’s eyes narrowed.

“Suzaku’s people.” He murmured, and Suiko nodded.

“As you say.” She agreed.

“So Amiboshi was the one who had Seiryuu’s Shinzahou — Amiboshi was the one protecting it, and the one who gave it to the South?” Ouno asked. “Is that right, sir? It was *Amiboshi* who did that?”

“So it would seem.” Hyoushin agreed, and anger glittered in Kayu’s expression.

“What kind of patriotism is that?” He demanded. “Amiboshi was born to serve Seiryuu — he was given the task of protecting Seiryuu’s Shinzahou from enemy attention and what does he do? He gives it right into Suzaku’s hands! I don’t think we should go see him unless we’re going to bring justice against him, sir! He’s no ally of ours, if he acts like that!”

Hyoushin was silent for a moment. Then he shook his head.

“Seiryuu’s legend is over, and such pointless violence serves no purpose.” He said, a faint reproach in his tones. “No, Kayu. Calm your temper. Amiboshi acted in an incomprehensible way, but we have possession of the treasure now. So it is immaterial, how it came to be in Suzaku’s hands. And if he can provide us with no information on Genbu’s treasure, he is of no interest to us.”

He leant up against the wall, clearly deep in thought, and as Kayu gazed at him, faint resentment flickered in his heart at the casual dismissal of the Seishi’s treasonous actions.

“He’s as cold to it as ever.” He mused inwardly. “He truly doesn’t care about anything except the orders he has right at the moment. Is

he really that much the Emperor's puppet? In which case... do I really suspect him of being smart enough to commit treason?"

He frowned, remembering the scene that he and Ouno had witnessed earlier.

"Then what was *that* about?" He wondered. "Two children — Meihi children — is there some connection I'm not seeing? Hyoushin-sama's past is wrapped in mystery... is there a reason for that? One that not even Kintsusei-sama is aware of? Why else would a man join the very armed forces that once slaughtered his people? And why would he look like that — so troubled and haunted, like the cares of the world had suddenly invaded his senses?"

He narrowed his gaze, scrutinising his Commander carefully, but he could see no sign of the earlier lapses in composure, and he sighed.

"I become more confused the more I think about this." He realised. "And either way, it's not getting us any closer to Genbu's treasure."

"For now we must stay in Touran." The Meihi spoke at that moment, bringing Kayu's attention back to the situation at hand. "Tomorrow we will conduct a sweep of the perimeter and the surrounding villages. If we fail to locate information then, we will have to consider moving on. However, I have left Touran as a point of contact for Maichu when he crosses the Northern border. His information may yet be valuable to us — if Kounan has discovered anything about Genbu's treasure, Aoiketsu will surely have relayed it, and then we will be somewhat the wiser. I would prefer to stay here and search more definitively before we think about leaving the capital. I would sooner have Maichu back with our party before we depart for unknown provinces."

"Do you mean... we're going up *that* mountain again?" Ouno's eyes widened, and Hyoushin's eyes flickered briefly with something more than his usual impassive composure. Slowly the Meihi shook his head.

"It is a dangerous, difficult climb, and the elements are against you." He said softly. "I will take the mountain myself, since I am less prone to cold than any of the rest of you. There are a good many settlements and prairie villages surrounding Touran, however — and I will advise you all to study the maps carefully before you retire for the night. We will not leave Touran until we are absolutely certain that no trace of the Genbu treasure remains in this region."

"I'd rather be in Touran than up that mountain." Jakou admitted ruefully. "And I think the Commander's right. If Maichu has information, it might help — and if he doesn't, well, it's another body

to search — right?”

“Exactly.” Hyoushin looked approving. “Our numbers are already more limited than I’d like.”

His gaze flitted to the doorway, and he sighed.

“Kitora, you may come in, you know.” He said frankly, and Kayu turned, seeing the Byakko mage lounging against the doorframe. “Is it worth me asking you where you have been?”

“Here and there.” Kitora purred softly, offering the Commander an innocent smile, and as she did so, Kayu saw the glint of something red against her teeth. Inwardly he shuddered, realising that the feline mage was indeed more cat than person, and that the stains indicated some unsuspecting beast which had become her prey. He bit his lip, hoping that her target had not been human.

Hyoushin seemed to think the same way, because he frowned, slowly shaking his head.

“You are a poor representative of the Tiger you serve.” He said evenly. “I trust I will not find you have slain anyone in the time you have been out of my sight?”

“No, not yet.” Kitora shook her head. “I was just prowling around the area, that’s all. Cats hunt, you know — and your talks are boring. I don’t have to listen to more than one of them to know what you’re going to say.”

“I would sooner you came anyway, even if you sleep through my commands.” Hyoushin said lightly. “I do not wish you out of my sight.”

His gaze flitted to Kayu.

“She has caused you no trouble today?” He asked softly. Kayu frowned, shrugging.

“She’s psychotic, and she wants to kill everything she sees. Otherwise, no.” He said flatly, and Hyoushin’s lips thinned.

“Yes.” He murmured. “I apologise for the unpleasant nature of the duty, Kayu. Thank you for ensuring she did not have her way among Hokkan’s people.”

“It’s all right.” Kayu looked startled. “She’s just irritating. That’s all.”

“Quite so.” Hyoushin mused. “But a necessary burden nonetheless, it seems.”

He sighed, for a moment looking tired, and Kayu once more felt the doubts nagging at the back of his senses.

“What did you find out, sir? Did you manage to get any clues from that plaque?” Bouri asked. Hyoushin shook his head.

“No more than what I already knew.” He replied. “That Okuda Takiko entered the Shijin Tenchishou at that location, and summoned Genbu with the aid of her Seishi. Her treasure was sealed in the mountain cave under the guard of two of her warriors — and we have already seen that it is not there now. But even so, I will go tomorrow and find out. At least then I can say for sure, should the Emperor ask me.”

“Can I come with you this time, Hyoushin?” Suiko asked hopefully, and Hyoushin shook his head.

“You appear to dislike the cold more than my men do.” He said evenly, but there was none of his usual impatience towards the mage in his tone, and Kayu wondered at it. “Besides, it is not an easy trek. It is better that, if any should attempt it, it should be as few people as possible. It is likely a futile errand, and I would sooner put noone else at risk. I... I am Commander, and I am the one in whom the Emperor has trusted this mission. Therefore it should be me to go.”

Suiko sighed, sending him a reproachful look, but she did not argue, and Hyoushin turned back to his men.

“For tonight, you are dismissed.” He said softly. “Tomorrow, we will begin early once again. Do not be discouraged by today — I am sure that if we persevere we will succeed in discovering the treasure the Emperor seeks.”

“I think it would be as well to stop somewhere here for the night.”

As Myoume reined in her horse, Aoiketsu glanced around him, taking in the smooth blue-grey flow of the northern river and he bit his lip, nodding his head as if in acknowledgement of her suggestion.

“The Shouryuu is what we were going to follow.” He acknowledged softly. “If we’re... still heading for the border.”

He hesitated, casting Hikari a doubtful glance as he said this. She had chosen to ride with Myoume that day, and despite himself, the slight had cut through Aoiketsu’s heart like a knife. She had not spoken directly to him since they had left Choukou and, although he had remained one of the party, only Myoume had continued to act as if nothing untoward had occurred in the northern Kounan city.

Somehow, Aoiketsu drew faint comfort from this acknowledgement of his presence, but the isolation and mistrust that now divided him from his new allies was more difficult to bear than he had imagined it could be.

Well, he supposed bitterly to himself, as he dismounted his steed, looping the reins in his fingers as he looked for a good place to tether the beast for the night. Myoume had been proven right again. His feelings for Hikari had developed beyond simple acquaintance, and even though he did his best to ignore her indifference, it was proving a trial.

“Can you get down, Hiki, or do you want a hand?” Shishi hopped off her own steed, ignoring the Easterner completely as she did so, and Hikari shook her head.

“I’m okay.” She said firmly. “I can manage, I think. It’s easier to get off a horse than it is to get on one.”

“I’ll hold her steady.” Myoume said gently, dismounting and taking the beast’s leather harness tightly in her grip as she did so. “There. You should be able to make it now.”

Hikari hesitated for a moment, then, across the clearing she met Aoiketsu’s gaze and resolution hardened in her dark hazel eyes. She nodded, gripping the saddle tightly as she awkwardly swung herself over the side of the animal, landing with a thud on her feet alongside it.

“You’re getting better.” Shishi offered her a grin. “You’ll be ridin’ on your own at this rate.”

“No fear.” Hikari shook her head. “This is enough for me, thank you.”

“Well, then tomorrow you’ll have to ride with Aoi again.” Myoume said reflectively, and both Hikari and Aoi started at this, staring at the prophet in surprise. There was a moment of awkward silence, then Hikari shook her head.

“I don’t want to.” She said firmly. “I’d rather ride with you, Myoume.”

“Well, I don’t mind, in theory.” Myoume shrugged. “But your spiritual aura is pretty strong, Hikari-chan. And I’m having trouble watching out for Miramu when you’re so close by. I’m sorry... but I did promise Chichiri and Tasuki that I’d keep you safe. And I have to keep my promise.”

She smiled.

“Besides, I’m sure Aoi won’t mind.” She added. “And you know he’ll keep you safe. He did yesterday, after all.”

“Yes, but...” Hikari hesitated, and Aoiketsu dropped his gaze, unable to speak in his own defence.

“That was before we discovered he was a lying, spying-for-Kutou traitor.” Shishi said darkly. “No matter how you paint it up for us, Myoume — he’s still been deceiving us and leaking information about us to the enemy. I don’t care whether you say we should be helping Kutou or not. I almost preferred him as the weak idiot who can’t hold a sword — now I don’t have a clue *what* we’ve got travelling with us. An’ it makes me uneasy.”

“Me too.” Hikari admitted, and the pain in her voice made Aoiketsu flinch involuntarily. He raised his gaze, opening his mouth to speak, but as he caught the hurt in her hazel eyes, he shook his head, closing his lips.

Myoume sighed.

“Is this display of childishness going to go on much longer?” She asked softly, and Shishi started, wheeling on the prophet angrily.

“What do you mean, childishness?” She demanded. “Aoiketsu’s a goddamn spy! He told his buddies in the East to go ransack my home! Do you really expect me to trust him and welcome him with open arms?”

“Aoi saved Hikari’s life in Choukou.” Myoume said lightly. “And Reikaku-zan isn’t under any threat so long as Tasuki’s there to protect it, Shishi-chan. You’re acting before you think again, and you need to stop doing it. I told you. Aoiketsu isn’t our enemy. He may have come here as a spy, but he’s our ally and he always has been. Probably before even he knew it.”

“How do you figure that?” Hikari murmured. “Even if your predictions are true, Myoume... he came here to hurt Kounan.”

“That’s not true.” Aoiketsu protested. “I didn’t come here to do anything like that! I just... I want... Kounan is so peaceful and I wanted my home to be like that too. And I... I believe in the Emperor and I wanted to help him! I wanted to repay his kindness and help save Kutou. You don’t have a clue what it’s like, living in the middle of a civil war!”

“Cry me a river.” Shishi snorted. “Or even better, go jump in one.”

She gestured to the swift-flowing Shouryuu.

“Every word you say might as well be a lie now. We don’t know who you are, that’s the bottom line. And Myoume might be able to see all kinds of things but we can’t. Hiki an’ me, we see a traitor. A wolf in sheep’s clothing. That’s hard to get past. You’ve lied to us too much already, and I hate people who lie.”

“So... so do I.” Aoiketsu sighed, defeat crossing his expression at this. “And I can understand why you hate me. But...”

“But noone is going to hate anyone.” Myoume said smartly. “Is that understood? You girls need to remove your blinkers. How many times do I have to tell you that this isn’t Kounan’s battle, but a battle for the whole of the Shijin Tenchishou? You already know that Kintsusei-sama of Kutou is not the dark force we’re fighting against. Aoiketsu isn’t working for our enemy any more than either of you are. We’re on the same side because to save this world we have to save Kutou. That’s the only path open to us.”

“So, what, we’re expected to raise Suzaku and wish for *Kutou’s* peace?” Hikari eyed her incredulously. “Is that what you’re saying, Myoume?”

“Maybe.” Myoume said cautiously. “That much isn’t clear to me yet. Bits and pieces have become more vivid since Aoi’s cover was blown in Choukou, but there’s still a lot I don’t know.”

“You said I was your ally before even I knew it.” Aoiketsu said softly. “What did you mean, Myoume?”

“What I said.” Myoume spread her hands. “Your enemy is our enemy. The force that threatens Kutou threatens the people you hold dear there just as sure as it threatens the people Hikari and Shishi want to protect in Kounan. I’m getting fed up of this mentality of thinking behind borders. Don’t any of you realise that dividing the lands into East, West, North and South is the thing that’s allowed all of this to happen in the first place?”

“What do you mean?” Shishi looked startled, and Myoume frowned.

“Okay, let me put it another way.” She said quietly. “Okuda Takiko wished for peace in Hokkan. Ousugi Suzuno-sama wished for peace in Sairou. Yuuki Miaka wished for peace in Kounan. Correct so far?”

“Yes. And Hongou Yui *didn’t* wish for peace in Kutou.” Aoiketsu said bitterly. “So people continue to suffer and die there.”

“Each of the Priestesses — with the exception of Hongou Yui, for

whatever reason — did their duty for their countries.” Myoume continued evenly. “But which of them thought to wish for peace *between* the lands? Can you answer me that? Did their concerns stretch beyond the borders of their own country — or did they only care to protect those they’d been brought here to serve? In the end, the Beast Gods protect the four lands. They are allied, even if we are not. But the people have been divided by war and human greed for generations. Kutou is the perfect example of it... and Shishi, your attitude towards the East is quite natural for one who’s grown up in the aftermath of the Kutou-Kounan war. But it’s also unhealthy. These lands can never fully heal past rifts if the current people think only in terms of their own country’s interests.”

“Meaning... that that’s why I’m here?” Hikari asked faintly. “That’s why I was drawn here... because I’m *not* Suzaku no Miko?”

“I’m starting to think so.” Myoume agreed. “You’re Suzaku’s Shinzahou — powerful in your own right. What you possess is the God’s own power sealed inside of you, Hikari-chan. Not the summoning power of Suzaku no Miko... but something infinitely stronger.”

She sighed.

“And yet that explanation doesn’t join up all the dots.” She admitted. “There are still questions in my mind. Still... it’s the best theory I have at present.”

She shrugged, gesturing towards Aoiketsu.

“*He* was born because Nakago failed.” She added. “Because the Seishi’s life ended, but his duty did not — I’m sure of that. The reason that Kutou’s Shougun sired a son was no coincidence, and no random liason gone wrong. Whatever the circumstances of it, Kaiga Aoiketsu was born for a reason.”

She cast Aoiketsu a smile.

“You know that too, don’t you, Aoi? That you’re not like your fellow soldiers in Kutou? You must do. You’re not a Seishi in the true sense — but you’ve still inherited a legacy from him that most of your fellows haven’t. Seiryuu’s legend isn’t over yet. Kutou hasn’t found peace, so even in the absence of Yui-sama and her seven stellar warriors — it hasn’t ended.”

She sat back, glancing at Hikari.

“Something similar occurred in Kounan, although you probably don’t know it as such.” She continued. “Miaka-sama didn’t solve

Kounan's problems in one fell swoop. Because of the war between the two countries, Celestial wishes were wasted... that's why the girl called Mayo was involved, and why you were designated Shinzahoo — in order to finish the job. Chichiri told me as much when I asked him — that six years ago was the last time all seven Suzaku warriors were united and Suzaku was summoned to finally bring peace to the south."

"I suppose I understand that." Hikari frowned. "At least, it explains why Aunt Mayo was involved at all, if my mother is the only true Suzaku no Miko."

"Right." Myoume agreed. "But Kutou hasn't got to that point. There's been no resolution there, not as yet. And Aoi-kun — that's partly where you come in."

"Aoi's Seiryuu no Miko's replacement?" Shishi snorted with derision. "No wonder he looks so girly, then."

"That's not what I mean." Despite herself Myoume hid a smile, shaking her head. "No, Shishi, not in that sense. I simply mean that Aoi has elements of Nakago's spirit lying dormant in his blood. Elements of Seiryuu's power. Probably more so than you do Suzaku in yours, since Tasuki has fulfilled his role as a Celestial Warrior. Something may have passed down to you — I can't be sure. Certainly his ethics and Suzaku's sense of fellowship and loyalty has, for sure. But in Aoi's case it's something more than that."

Aoiketsu bit his lip, remembering the trip beneath the caves where his blood had unsealed the shrine, and Myoume eyed him keenly.

"*You do* know what I mean, Aoi-kun." She said softly. "I can see it on your face. Already something's happened to make you think that way — hasn't it?"

Slowly Aoiketsu nodded.

"I guess... so." He said softly. "I mean... I think... I think so. Because when we went to get Suiko's scale from the shrine... somehow I managed to open the door. And it was *my* blood, not a Seishi's blood. The Emperor wanted me to use *my* blood to unlock her casket. So I... I did."

"Powerful enough to raise a mage from her sleep." Myoume looked thoughtful. "My instinct about you was right, then — when we had that conversation at Taichi-ike, I did wonder about that... though obviously at the time I couldn't voice it. The bottom line is that you are more powerful than you realise you are. The mages should only be

revived by true Celestial blood — which proves that you must have Nakago's blood, decisively. And that your Emperor asked it of you... means that *he* has been aware of that fact, even if *you* have not."

"But... noone*has* ever told me officially that he was my father. I've been raised as Kaiga Aoiketsu." Aoiketsu rubbed his temples. "The Shougun is equally loved and resented in Kutou — for what he tried to do and what he failed to achieve. Probably for that reason... noone's ever told me the truth about who I am. And though I... I've wondered about a lot of things, I've never known for sure. I doubted Kaiga Gin was my father for a while — my eyes are blue, but none of the Kaiga family's ever were. It's only since I came to Kounan that I began to think about Nakago with any seriousness. After something Chichiri said — and you, Hikari, about my eyes being blue like his were. All in all, the concept is sort of new to me, too."

He grimaced, shaking his head.

"I'm really sorry that you're upset with me." He murmured. "You especially, Hikari. I... I don't like it, when you hate me. I don't regret saving your life in Choukou, but I wish you hadn't had to find out about me this way. The longer it's gone on, the worse I've felt about it. I... I... I guess Myoume must be right, and it must be because I have feelings for you. But I don't deserve you to return them, and I guess you feel like you don't know who I am now — that I've betrayed your trust as well as Kounan's hospitality."

He raised his gaze, slowly lifting his hands in a gesture of surrender.

"If you wish to hand me over to Reizeitei-sama for judgement, I won't fight it." He added sadly.

"Noone's being sacrificed." Myoume scolded. "I told you in Choukou — you're an ally for Suzaku no Shinzahu. You were born for a reason — that reason is to protect Hikari from harm."

"That doesn't make sense." Shishi objected. "No matter how often you say it, it doesn't. Hikari belongs to Suzaku. Aoi's from the East."

"Were you listening to what I said about borders, Shishi-chan?" Myoume asked softly, and Shishi sighed.

"All right, already. I get it." She muttered. "It doesn't matter about that. Fine. Okay then."

"But even if that's true..." Hikari's eyes became big as she absorbed the prophet's implication. "Myoume... are you saying that Aoi... that he only was born... *because* of me?"

“Not exactly.” Myoume shook her head. “As I said, he was most likely born because Nakago didn’t complete everything he was put here to do. But once he *was* born, he was irrevocably connected to you. Through what power, I can’t be sure — or why, exactly, that it should be the case. But I think it’s entirely deliberate. The Gods are fed up of the suspicion and fighting between their lands. Maybe that’s why they choose to unite Suzaku’s power with the son of Seiryuu’s strongest Seishi... and make them fight together to save this world. Neither one of you can escape that fact... it is why you are both here in the ShijinTenchishou at this time. To save it. Without a doubt.”

She glanced at her hands, then across at Shishi with a rueful smile.

“You and I both too, I imagine.” She added. “I don’t think our being here is a coincidence either.”

“Fine. I get that.” Shishi said softly. “At least, for *you*. You’re Byakko’s. If Hiki’s Suzaku’s and Aoi belongs to Seiryuu in some way... what the hell does that make Jin and me? Cannon fodder?”

“Something we don’t yet understand, perhaps.” Myoume reflected. “Jin is no longer part of the equation, Shishi — but you are. More, you were part of my vision when I first saw Hikari — the lion and the light, remember? You two were connected too. Maybe it is your own Seishi blood after all — I don’t know yet. But whatever it is, the bottom line is that we’re all drawn to Hikari — to the light. And if we’re going to succeed, we have to have a little faith in one another. Aoiketsu’s been foolish, but he had good intentions. Shishi-chan, you’d do the same if Kounan was in peril, I know you would. At the risk of your life, you’d cross the border to find your country’s salvation — wouldn’t you?”

Shishi’s eyes narrowed at this, and slowly she nodded.

“I guess I would.” She admitted at length. “To protect Kounan... like Kashira an’ Chichiri have... yes, I suppose I would. Because... I guess that at least is in my blood.”

She sighed, gesturing in Aoiketsu’s direction.

“And I s’pose because of that I can believe it’s in yours, too, to protect Kutou.” She added. “Even if your Pa was a psycho nutjob who slaughtered people.”

“Nakago allowed his own interests to surpass Seiryuu’s.” Myoume agreed. “In the absence of Shichi Seishi, there are few people in the East who can act in Kutou’s interests. Aoiketsu isn’t a Seishi — but he is a strong and resolute young fighter. Possibly the best in Kutou at

present, I'd imagine."

She smiled.

"You're lucky he *didn't* choose to fight you, Shishi." She added. "If anything is indication that he's not like his father, that would be it. You're strong — I know that. But Aoiketsu's heritage and his training make him stronger. If he wanted to kill you, he could have done it at any time since he came here."

"You're... that strong?" Hikari eyed Aoiketsu doubtfully, and Aoiketsu shrugged.

"I'm not bad." He acknowledged. "But I told you — I was trained only to fight when necessary. I'd have killed those traders we met earlier, had they really tried to hurt you. I wouldn't have flinched from it at all. But I won't fight any of you. No matter what you do to me."

For a moment Hikari was silent, then she offered him a faint smile.

"For a minute there, you looked at me like you did... before." She whispered. "In the village, when you were... Aoi-kun."

"I'm still Aoi-kun." Aoiketsu objected, and Hikari sighed.

"I guess we'll see." She owned. "I don't like that you lied. Or that you were spying on me. I don't like *that* either. Maybe I trusted you too easily — but I don't like feeling like I've been duped or betrayed. Especially since... I... I do really like you. A lot. And if we *are* connected like Myoume says — it just sucks, that's all."

She pinkened.

"I've never felt like this about a guy." She added awkwardly. "But it's about a guy I don't know any more. I'm not even sure if he exists at all. And I don't like that... it makes me feel unsafe."

Aoiketsu sighed heavily.

"I don't want to betray Kutou." He said quietly. "But I don't want to hurt you, either. What can I do? I'm stuck between two things... two important things. But if Myoume's right, and everything in Kutou is going to fall apart, I could be reporting information to the wrong people anyway. So... I've never had to make such heavy decisions before and it's difficult. Hyoushin-sama would know what choice to make, but I'm on my own this time. And I don't know if I can save Kutou all on my own."

"You ain't on your own, you idiot." Shishi said frankly. "We're with

you, aren't we?"

"But..." Aoiketsu eyed her in surprise, and Shishi shrugged.

"I'm still pissed at you." She admitted. "But damn glad you've quit talkin' in that stupid, messed up way. An' if you are as good a fighter as Myoume says, we'll find a way to put it to use. You're in Kounan's debt, right? So we'll get our use out of you. But from hereon in, you're noone but your real self, okay? And you tell us nothing but the truth. No matter what it is."

Aoiketsu frowned, then he nodded his head.

"All right. That seems fair." He agreed. He reached up to touch his thick dark hair, then, with a brief, quick sweep of his hand he pulled the white ties loose, dropping all but one of them down on the ground. "To be honest, I've hated it too. Back home, I'm always teased about looking like a girl, and dammit, dressed up like this I feel like it, too."

He pulled his hair back from his face, fastening it firmly in a single warrior's queue behind his head.

"And I have too much hair to have it flapping around my face like that." He added. "Now I can at least breathe."

"You shouldn't discard your disguise completely, though." Myoume cautioned. "For now, if we suspect dark forces in Kutou, it'd be better if they don't know we know who you are. After all, we don't know yet who *they* are — and we don't need to give them an advantage."

"I suppose so." Aoiketsu looked troubled. "And that means I'll have to reconvene with Maichu in Yukigase as planned, too. Shit. I don't want to lie to him."

"You'll have to, this time." Shishi said quietly, and Aoiketsu nodded.

"I know. Just in case... I know." He agreed. "At least until we know more. But dammit, he's my best friend — I don't want to betray someone else."

"I wouldn't concern yourself with Shi Maichu too much, Aoi-kun." Myoume said frankly. "He'll have his own demons to face before this is through."

"What do you mean?" Colour drained from Aoiketsu's face and he jumped up, grabbing the prophet by the arms as he gazed at her in alarm. "What's going to happen to Maichu — tell me, dammit! I can at least warn him if there's danger — *tell* me!"

"I can't." Myoume said simply. "I don't know enough, yet."

"Dammit, Myoume, why say something like that, then!"

"Sometimes I can't help it." Myoume shrugged, an apologetic look entering her indigo eyes. "Words just spill out without my calling them. I'm sorry, Aoi-kun. I don't know what fate is awaiting your friend, or what the outcome will be. I only know that Shi Maichu's name is known to me, and that when I saw him in the mountain cave, I felt very strongly that his part had not yet been fully played out."

"Aoi-kun, calm down." Hikari said anxiously, and Aoiketsu bit his lip.

"Maichu and I grew up together." He murmured. "If my being found out has put him in danger..."

"You haven't put him in danger. Yet." Myoume shook her head. "But if you say anything to him of this, you might. He's better not knowing anything until he has to... I told you, he has his own path to walk and he'll walk it, no matter what you do."

Aoiketsu sank back against the trunk of the tree, nodding his head slowly.

"All right." He murmured. "But... I... If you find out... if you discover whatever it is... promise to tell me? Because if you're going to doom him like you did Jin..."

"I don't know if telling anyone would do any good." Myoume admitted. "But if it's what you want, I'll try."

"Tell him." Shishi said quietly. "At least let him make the decision about what to do, Myoume. You gave Jin that chance. He at least knew what he was going into. I don't know Aoi's friend, and I don't know if I care what happens to him. But dammit, if something's goin' to, at least give Aoi the opportunity to warn him about it. Because I know how shit it is to lose someone like that. An' even if I'm pissed at Aoi — I'm fed up with people dying because of what's going on in the East."

"On that, Shishi, we're agreed." Aoiketsu said darkly, and Myoume smiled.

"Then we've reached an accord." She said evenly. "We are all, in fact, on the same side... aren't we?"

"I suppose we are." Hikari pulled her skirt absently over her knees, shivering. "Can we start a fire or something now, please? I'm cold."

“I’ll go gather firewood.” Shishi got to her feet. “Aoi, get off your ass and come help me, huh? Myoume and Hiki can see to the horses and set up some space for us when we get back. Myoume has the supplies, in any case — an’ I’m hungry.”

“Me?” Aoiketsu looked surprised, and Shishi nodded.

“Yes, unless Aoiketsu isn’t your name after all.” She said frankly, and Aoiketsu grimaced.

“It is.” He said regretfully. “Much as I wish it wasn’t.”

“It’s a stupid name all right.” As the two of them disappeared into the surrounding woodland, Shishi shot him a speculative look. “It sort of suits you.”

Aoiketsu snorted.

“You know, I didn’t think I’d be glad to hear you insulting me.” He reflected. “But I guess it’s better than being completely ignored.”

“Well, you *are* an idiot.” Shishi said bluntly. “But I guess I see it from Myoume’s perspective too. An’ yours, when it comes to that.”

She frowned, leaning up against a tree as she gazed at him.

“You really love Hiki, huh?” She asked softly. Aoiketsu started, then slowly he nodded his head.

“I think so.” He agreed. “Whatever it is... it’s been curling up inside me since the first time we met and I can’t stop it. But I’ve never really been interested in a girl like this before. So...”

He shrugged.

“I won’t let harm come to her, if that’s what you want to know.” He added. “Even if in your eyes my word means nothing, I’ll give it. I will protect her. What I did in Choukou was instinctive — I didn’t even stop and think about it. And I don’t regret it. If it came to it — I’d do it again.”

Shishi eyed him for a moment. Then she nodded.

“If you’re such a hotshot fighter, you’ll have to show me what makes you so great.” She said decidedly. “I’m still finding it hard to picture you with a sword of any kind in your hands, to be honest.”

“Well, then give me yours and I’ll prove it right now.” Aoiketsu suggested, holding out his hands. Shishi hesitated for a moment, then she shrugged, pulling her weapon from her scabbard and holding it out to him.

“If you attack me, Hiki’ll never forgive you.” She warned him. Aoiketsu snorted.

“I don’t attack women. Especially not unarmed ones.” He said derisively. “What do you think Eastern soldiers are made of, anyway, Shishi? I’ve been properly trained, not just given a sword and told to go kill stuff.”

He glanced up at the tree, then nodded.

“But if we want a fire, we need wood.” He added, slipping the weapon into his right fist. “And that’s where this comes in. Stand back, huh?”

“Stand back, he says — like I’m some weak little girl who needs his protection.” Shishi muttered, but she obediently did as she was bidden, and Aoiketsu gauged the distance between him and the lower branches of the tree, eying the blade for a moment, then nodding his head.

“This’ll do, though you should take better care of it.” He said frankly. “It might be the difference between your life and death — or someone else’s. It’s not so sharp as it could be... soldiers have died over less.”

“Stop giving me a lecture and cut the frigging branch down already.” Shishi snapped, and Aoiketsu grinned. He nodded, reaching out to grab a nearby bough as he pulled himself up onto the lower branches of the tree. He perched carefully against the wood, swinging the weapon neatly and cleanly through the wood of its neighbour, slicing it through as it juddered and then tumbled to the ground.

“If it was a branch any thicker than that your sword would snag on it.” He told her, leaping down to the ground as he held the weapon out to her. “It’s not sharp enough.”

“It’s also not designed for tree cutting.” Shishi eyed him for a moment, then took her weapon back, glancing at it then slipping it into its scabbard. “But all right. You’ve made your point. I guess I believe you. I suppose if you can hold a sword like that — you probably can fight.”

“So long as I don’t draw blood.” Aoiketsu said ruefully, and Shishi chuckled.

“That’s sort of funny.” She reflected. “That you’re Nakago’s son, and he killed a shitload of people. And yet you can’t even stand a little bit of red stuff... you’re some weird kind of soldier, when all’s said and done.”

“That’s why I hate my name most of all.” Aoiketsu admitted. “Because the second character is “*chi*” — blood. It’s in my name, and even despite that...”

He sighed.

“Hyoushin-sama says it’s a matter of will.” He concluded. “But I’ve trained to fight since I was five, Shishi. And I’m still as bad with blood as I ever was before. Maybe it’s hopeless.”

“Is that why you didn’t kill those jerks who picked on Hiki?” Shishi asked. Aoiketsu shrugged.

“It wasn’t necessary in the end.” He reflected. “But I’d have done it, blood or not, if they’d hurt her.”

“You mean that.” Shishi pursed her lips. “And I’m glad you do. You ain’t Jin, Aoi, an’ you ain’t goin’ to match up to what he was. But... maybe you’ll do. Now we know who you really are... maybe you’ll be useful after all.”

“I don’t want to be compared to Jin.” Aoiketsu admitted. “Truth is, I think I... I’m a little jealous of the guy.”

“Jealous?” Shishi stared. “Jin’s dead, Aoi — what the hell is there to be jealous of?”

“Hikari trusted him.” Aoiketsu said softly. “Even if she wasn’t in love with him, she still... she trusted him. And he was the kind of person who easily obtained trust. I... I’m not. I’ve lied to her, and she says herself she doesn’t know me. Which means she can’t trust me. And so... I guess...”

He faltered, and Shishi rested her hand on his arm, shaking her head.

“Jin was Jin. You can’t match who he was or what he did.” She said solemnly. “So do yourself a favour an’ don’t worry about it. Hiki has feelings for you, an’ you’ve just been an ape — you’ve brought this all on yourself. But... well, she does forgive. She an’ me, we started off on real shit terms. But that’s behind us now. You jus’ gotta prove to her that you ain’t a liar by nature. That’s all.”

“You’ve changed your tune.” Aoiketsu looked startled, and Shishi shrugged.

“I prefer a soldier than a wimp.” She said acerbically. “Besides, there ain’t a lot of time. When this is over, Hiki will go home. And her happiness matters to me too, you know. Even if I ain’t totally sure about *you* yet — I care about Hiki and it’s all too obvious how *she*

feels about it.”

“Home to... Tokyo?” Aoiketsu frowned. “It must be a long ride from here, then.”

“Are you completely simple?” Shishi snorted. “Don’t you understand yet? Hikari doesn’t come from this world. She’s from the Miko’s world. Her mother was Miaka-sama — right? Her father left this world an’ his Seishi identity behind so he could follow her. Hiki’s not from Kounan or even the Shijin-Tenchishou. An’ when we’re done kickin’ the enemy’s ass, she’ll go right on back again. Back to that world. Where we can’t go.”

Aoiketsu froze, staring at Shishi in dismay, and the bandit nodded.

“It sucks, but it’s how it is.” She said pragmatically. “That’s why she’s so special, Aoi. Because she’s from *their* world. Whatever strange power the Miko have — Hiki’s come from the same place they do. Do you get it now?”

Aoiketsu swallowed hard.

“I didn’t realise.” He murmured, disturbed by the sudden intensity of his emotions. “So she... will leave? Forever? When we... if we... save Kutou? And this world?”

“Yep.” Shishi sighed. “Aw, shit, please tell me you ain’t the kind of lovesick idiot who weeps over stuff, Aoi. I was just beginnin’ to respect you, but you look shattered. Are you seriously that attached to her already?”

“I’m not going to cry, don’t be a moron.” Aoiketsu gathered his wits. “I just... never met anyone from that world before. It’s a shock. That’s all. I didn’t know.”

“Well, if that’s the case then it’s one less thing your buddies in the East have to use against us.” Shishi said evenly. “Maybe I shouldn’t tell you it now — but you’re not going to betray us a second time... are you?”

Aoiketsu hesitated for a moment. Then he frowned, shaking his head.

“Whatever is happening in Kutou, I want to stop it from making things worse.” He said quietly. “And I want... I want to protect Hikari. No matter where she’s from or what she is to this world.”

“Then it’s all right.” Shishi nodded approvingly. “So stop standin’ there and help me get more wood, will you? The fire won’t start itself an’ we ain’t got enough to even light one yet.”

“Right.” Aoiketsu nodded. “For now, getting to the border is the important thing. I... I’ll meet with Maichu in Yukigase and I’ll be careful what I say to him. Then, when we cross the border I... I’ll break contact until I know more about what’s going on. Maybe by then Myoume will see things more clearly.”

“You believe in Myoume?”

“I don’t have a choice. Everything she said to me so far has come true.” Aoiketsu shrugged. “So yes, I believe in her. And I’ll just have to hope that her sight comes good, before I have to properly choose between Hikari and my homeland.”

Chapter 12

Chapter Eleven

The houses all around him were burning.

As the screams and confusion of his neighbours broke through the crackle of the flames, Lilaihi gripped hold of the wooden sill of his home, peering fearfully out at the mayhem outside. In his ten years alive, he had never seen anything like this before, and terror ripped through his young heart as he realised the small, peaceful settlement had almost instantaneously been turned into a haze of black ash and amber fire.

“Lilaihi, get away from there! Get back!”

His mother’s desperate voice startled him as a strong hand pulled him forcibly away from the window. He gazed up at her in fear, noticing for the first time in his young life that tears stained the older woman’s pale cheeks. He had never seen his mother so unsettled before, and he did not like the way it made him feel. She hugged him tightly to her, shaking her head as a loud crash from outside sent shards of timber flying in through the open window-frame.

“What’s happening.” He whispered. “Mama... what’s happening out there? Where... what about Papa?”

“Stay here.” His mother murmured, her voice strained and anxious over the rising cacophany from outside. “Just stay here. That’s what your father said... we must stay here.”

“Mama... I’m scared.” The sound of his sister’s voice broke somehow through Lilaihi’s own rising panic, and he glanced down, seeing the tiny, tearful face raised to theirs, distress in his big amethyst eyes. “Why are those men come to our village? What did we do — why do they hate us?”

“We didn’t do anything, Rayi-chan.” The older woman shook her head. “Just do as I say. Stay here with me... it will all be all right, if we stay here.”

“Papa’s been a long time.” The third occupant of the house murmured fearfully. “Those men throw fire and... and... they want to hurt us. Is Papa... is Papa okay?”

“Your father told us to stay here, Kaliri-kun.” His mother repeated. “Stop asking me questions... please don’t ask them any more. I can’t answer... I don’t know why the demons came. I just... I just know we have

to do as your father tells us. Please..."

Her voice faltered and petered out into nothing, and Lilaihi shot her another glance, old enough to read the doubt and uncertainty in her own gentle eyes. He bit his lip, fighting the urge to panic.

"Papa isn't here." He said quietly. "But it... it's okay, Mama. I... I'll protect you. I'm the oldest... and I'll protect everyone. I promise."

"Lilai-kun." The older woman hugged him tightly to her, running her fingers through his tousled silver hair. "You're so like your father... you make me so proud when you say things like that. But listen... listen to me. Those men... they're dangerous people. They have weapons and ways that we don't understand. I don't want you hurt... do you understand me? You, your brother, your sister... I won't have you hurt. You must stay here... your father will know what to do. You know that... he always does."

Before any of the children could respond, there was a loud crash nearby and the building juddered, making all four of its inhabitants jump. Kaliri let out an exclamation, jumping back as he pointed at the far wall.

"It's broken! It's broken!" He exclaimed, a note of hysteria in his young voice. "Mother, the house is going to fall down! It's going to fall down!"

"I don't want to be squashed!" Lirayi's young eyes opened wide with horror, and at this Lilaihi reached out to grasp her by the hand.

"We won't be squashed." He said. "Will we, Mother? We... we'll be all right — won't we?"

The woman paused for a moment, eying the growing cracks in the wall with a moment of indecision. Then she frowned.

"We can't stay in a house that's about to come down around us." She murmured. "Stay close to me, all of you. We'll run from the back and escape that way. We'll wait for your father... if we can make it to safe ground, and hide. Do you understand? You mustn't stop... those people are not people we can fight."

"But Mama..." Kaliri protested, and his mother shook her head.

"Don't argue. Just come." She said firmly, grabbing him with her free hand and pulling him forcibly towards the back of the house. She forced open the rear divide, taking a step or two out into the smoke-filled, flame filled atmosphere, and momentarily she faltered, her bearings lost by the chaos around her. Lilaihi stood beside her, his eyes widening in horror as he registered the scale of the devastation.

"Death everywhere." Kaliri whispered, putting his brother's horrified thoughts into words as they surveyed the fallen members of their tribe, their

houses burned and wrecked by the armoured men on horses. Tears glittered on Lilaihi's cheeks, but he forced them back, knowing that he had to be strong for his family's sake. He slipped his hand into his mother's, eying her solemnly.

"Which way do we go, Mama?" He asked softly, and at his words, the woman at his side seemed to jerk back into some kind of awareness. She offered him a faint, tragic smile.

"Away from the flames." She murmured. "Come on. Quickly. As quick as you can... Rayi, can you run, or shall I carry you?"

"Rayi can run." Lirayi said firmly. "I'm coming too, Mama... don't leave me behind!"

"Jaeiyi! Jaeiyi!" As they began their dash, they could hear a voice calling from the wreckage of one of the fallen houses and despite herself, at the sound of her name the mother paused, turning to glance back. Beneath the rubble, the blooded figure of their neighbour was just visible, reaching out a plaintive, charcoal stained hand in search of aid, and Jaeiyi bit her lip, clearly in a quandary.

"Mama?" Kaliri murmured fearfully, and Jaeiyi hesitated for a moment, then shook her head.

"Lilaihi-kun, take them and find safety." She said urgently. "Don't turn back, no matter what. Do you understand me? Take Kaliri and Lirayi out of danger and wait for me."

"But Mama..."

"Do it!" There was a note of anxiety in the woman's normally measured tones, and Lilaihi's expression became one of determination. He nodded, taking his brother and his sister's hands firmly in his grip.

"Come on." He said sharply. "You heard her. We'll go and find somewhere safe to hide."

"But what about Mama? What about Papa?" Lirayi asked plaintively. "Oniichan — what about them?"

"We're better doing as Mother says." Lilaihi said firmly, as they darted off through the smoke. "Those men are demons. I have to find somewhere for you to hide."

"For us... to?" Kaliri demanded, and Lilaihi nodded, his bright, clever eyes scanning the landscape for a good place of concealment.

"Over there." He decided. "Towards the trees on the southern perimeter. You can hide up those — you can climb, and they won't see you — you're

only small after all.”

“But... Niichan... what about Niichan?” Lirayi demanded, as they reached the small copse of trees. The wind had blown the flames in the opposite direction, and there was some justification for Lilaihi’s split-second choice. He frowned now, shaking his head.

“Climb.” He said softly. “And stay there. No matter what... till Mama or Papa come and get you. Okay?”

He lifted Lirayi in his arms, and she gazed at him, anxiety in her expression.

“What about Niichan?” She repeated, and Lilaihi bit his lip.

“I have to go back to help Mama and Papa.” He said quietly, setting his sister on the lowest-most branch of the tree as he guided her small arms around the trunk, and Kaliri let out an exclamation.

“But you can’t! Mama said...”

“I promised to protect everyone, didn’t I?” Lilaihi cut across him. “I’m the eldest, and I’m a boy... and Papa can’t do it all alone. Besides, Mama’s all alone too, now. And I... I won’t let them hurt her. Kaliri, I want you to take Rayi up the tree and keep her safe. She’s only little and she’ll need your help to climb out of sight. But you’re better at climbing than any of us — so I know you can do it.”

“I don’t want you to go back to the fire, Nii-chan.” Lirayi shook her head, fresh tears glittering on her cheeks. “I want you to stay! Everyone’s going, one by one — I want you to stay!”

Lilaihi shot her a pained look, then he shook his head.

“Kali-kun, will you do it?” He asked quietly, and saw a look of resolution cross the seven year old boy’s face.

“I’ll look after Rayi. You help Mama.” He said softly. “And Papa. And come back here, all of you. Don’t let the demons get you, Oniichan.”

“Stay with me! Nii-chan, stay with me!” Lirayi’s fingers grasped out for the fabric of her brother’s robe, and Lilaihi’s heart clenched in his chest as he made up his mind what he had to do. Gently he unpried her fingers, shaking his head.

“There’s only one thing I can do — we have to get the demons to leave, else we’ll have no home left and they’ll just kill everyone.” He said solemnly. “So I... I’ll go with Father... I’ll go help him stop this! And then I’ll come back, Lirayi. I promise, I’ll come back! For you, for Mother, for Kaliri. Father and I will protect you — I promise we’ll come back!”

"Lilai-nii, be careful." Kaliri said anxiously. "Those men... be careful."

Lilaihi nodded, pressing his hands together in a gesture of parting.

"You both too." He agreed soberly. Then he turned, heading purposefully back towards the burning settlement and his neighbour's collapsed house. As he drew nearer, however, he could hear raised voices, and he concealed himself behind a shattered wall, peering around it as he saw the sprawled, blood-soaked form of the neighbour on the charred ground. The woman lay still, and Lilaihi drew breath sharply as he registered the dark figure standing over her, a glittering blade in his grip. Blood ran from the hilt to the tip, dripping into a pool on the ground, but what horrified the young boy most of all was the broad smile on the man's cruel, battle-scarred face. He wore the glinting blue steel of Kutou's Imperial Army, and the dragon's image that wound its way across the man's helmet struck new terror into Lilaihi's young heart.

Not far from the woman's body, his mother was huddled against the remains of the house, fear in her eyes as she gazed up at the soldier uncertainly. For a moment there was no movement, then the man turned towards her, shaking his blade as if to clear the drying blood from its tip. He took a step towards her, and Liliahi's heart clenched in his chest.

"Mama!" He exclaimed, darting forward and startling the soldier with the sudden nature of his yell. "Mama, no!"

"Lilai-kun!" Horror flickered in the woman's frightened expression. "No... why are you... Why did you come back here!?"

"I said I'd protect you!" Lilaihi stepped between the woman and the soldier's bloody blade, holding his hands out in a gesture of defiance. The man paused, lowering his sword for a moment and Lilaihi was aware of derision in his gaze. He said something, but his words were spoken in harsh Eastern dialect and the boy did not understand his meaning.

"Lilaihi, you shouldn't have come back." There was reproach in Jaeiyi's voice. "I told you — to go and take care of your siblings."

"I made them hide." Lilaihi said frankly, as he felt his mother reach for his fingers, squeezing his hand tightly in her grip. "I told you, Mama. I want to protect you. Because I promised I would. And I can't break a Meihi promise."

"You're still just a child." Jaeiyi murmured, tears spilling down her cheeks as she hugged him tightly. "You have too much courage — don't you understand that I sent you away so that you'd not be killed? I couldn't bear that... my life is nothing to me compared with yours and your siblings'!"

“I made a promise.” Lilaihi repeated. “Papa says you should never break a promise. So I won’t, Mama. I’ll stay. And I’ll protect you.”

At that moment there was a flicker of shadow above them, and Lilaihi turned, fear paralysing him momentarily as he saw the glint of the soldier’s blade drive down towards them. However, before it could make contact, something else came between them, and Jaeiyi let out a gasp of surprise as Lilaihi registered the presence of his father, his clothes ripped and stained with both blood and ash as he wielded his sturdy length of tree branch in the attacker’s direction.

“Papa!” He exclaimed.

“Jaeiyi, take Lilaihi to safety.” His father said firmly, as he struggled to push away the blade. “Now, before it’s too late.”

Jaeiyi nodded, taking Lilaihi more firmly in her grip as she pulled herself to her feet. As they sought to leave, however, another two soldiers barred their way, one of them eying Jaeiyi in a leering, unpleasant way before his gaze flitted to the child at her side. As they began to close in, Lilaihi was aware of a gasp and then the sound of someone falling, and as he turned back, he let out a yell of dismay. His father’s sturdy form lay crumpled on the ground before them, blood spilling from his chest as the soldier raised his blade once more, bringing it down against the man’s throat. Jaeiyi let out a faint moan as the Meihi’s head was struck from his body, pressing her hands over Lilaihi’s eyes to try and prevent him from seeing, but it had been too late. His heart pounded against his ribcage in a sick, nauseated rhythm as he struggled to comprehend what he had seen.

“Papa.” He whispered, as bile lurched in his throat, tears stinging his eyes. “Papa!”

The soldier who had killed his father gave the still corpse a derogatory kick, then came across to join his companions, exchanging some words with them as they gazed from Jaeiyi to her son. Both Meihi eyed them fearfully, both dazed and terrified by the armoured demons that stood before them. At length one of the soldiers nodded, reaching out a rough hand to grab Lilaihi’s arm. Jaeiyi shrieked, struggling to keep a grip on her eldest child, and Lilaihi, his courage deserting him fought to regain his grip on something so familiar.

“Mama!” He screeched. “No! Let me go... I have to... Mama...!”

“Lilaihi!” Jaeiyi lunged forward in a desperate attempt to grab her child back from the soldier’s cruel clutches, but he just laughed, shaking his head as he pushed her back with his foot. Tightening his grip on his prey, he jerked his head in Jaeiyi’s direction, saying something to his colleagues. They nodded, and as they closed in around her, Lilaihi was aware of her

screaming his name. He kicked and struggled against his captor, but it was to no avail, and as the screams of his mother became louder and more incoherent, Lilaihi found himself being dragged away from her, towards the edge of the village where more of the armed men were waiting. Tears streamed down his cheeks, but the soldiers seemed oblivious to his fear or his grief, his captor holding him still as another bound his hands and legs. Now immobilised, he was hoisted once more up in the burly arms, and through the blurry state of his vision Lilaihi could just about make out a wagon in the distance, a faint, blueish design tattooed across its side. Vaguely he realised that this was the same blue dragon as the men had on their armour, but as they pulled back the flaps, the last of his strength gave out.

"Mama." He whispered, as the world around him swayed and went slowly black. **"Mama!"**

Hyoushin's eyes snapped open, for a moment unsure of where he was as the terror of his childhood memory sought to overwhelm his senses. Then, as he caught sight of the flickering curtain at the window, he drew a deep breath into his lungs, struggling to calm his racing heart. He was safe, in the inn in Hokkan, far away from the slaughter-grounds of Northern Kutou.

It had simply been a nightmare.

He pulled himself into a sitting position, registering the dampness of his pillows as he realised the recollection had brought him out in a cold sweat. Despite himself he shivered, pushing back the covers as he paced restlessly to the window. Pushing back the heavy drapes, he gazed sightlessly out on the frosted city, with its glimmering snow-topped peaks in the distance. The first rays of dawn were just beginning to crest on the horizon, glinting off the snow and giving them a ghostly effect, and he sighed, reaching up to rub his eyes as if hoping to forcibly dispel the illusion.

Despite himself, he felt physically sick as the pictures once more teased at his mind. He swallowed hard against the bitter bile that rose in his throat as he remembered his father's body, and the brutal, efficient way in which the soldier had decapitated him. He had acted so himself, he knew that — but for the first time since he had begun training as a soldier for Kutou, he understood where he had first learnt the technique.

"I have become all the things that the men who killed my family were." He reflected bleakly, speaking unconsciously in his native tongue as he sought to rationalise his thoughts into some coherence. "It's as if... in my subconscious... all these memories have become

skills I've learnt to use. I so feared the blue dragon, so I became a servant to it. I hated the armour of the Imperial Guard, so I came to wear it and lead men in its name. And I saw my father executed before me... and I... since then I... for my Emperor's sake..."

He closed his eyes as the unfamiliar sensation of tears pricked at the back of his gaze. He had not cried since he had been a boy, but he knew that did not mean he had forgotten how, and that, no matter how hard he fought to suppress them, his memories and his emotions were just beneath the surface, as raw and unchallenged as ever. After all, he told himself bitterly, he had never faced those feelings, nor sought to overcome them. He had simply shut them away, so that, in the end, he did not have to feel them at all.

"The coward's way." He murmured. "To forget both happy and sad times is to avoid the pain of either one. I am as weak a man now as I was then... but it has been some time since I was haunted quite like this. I must be getting weaker... or is it simply that you can only suppress a demon's memory for so long?"

He leant up against the glass, rubbing his temples as he fought to regain his composure. Fear and panic still raced through him, and as he glanced at his hands he realised that he was visibly trembling from the emotional aftershock of his dream.

After all, he mused bitterly, those memories had been locked up inside of him for a long time.

"But you cannot control what you dream, so much is the pity." He muttered. "And here, in Hokkan, flickers of the past tease me. The Meihai are here — they exist beyond just my recollections. And that unnerves me — the settlement so like my family's home."

He grimaced, sinking down onto the sill as he buried his head in his hands.

"This will not do." He muttered harshly, speaking aloud and in the reassuring Kutou dialect as he sought to distance himself once more from the Meihai boy called Lilaihi that once, a lifetime ago he had been born. "I cannot lose my way now. These things — these horrors — they must stay in their rightful place. It has been twenty five years since that day and I have learnt to forget it. To forget everything about that life. I am Hyoushin of the East — *Tou Hyoushin* — and that is all I am. Nothing else... I must not let myself remember! The past is the past... I must not let it become the present, too."

He moved back towards the bed, sitting down on the end as he cast a glance at the saddle-bag that held the Emperor's mirror. For a brief

instant his unsettled state made him consider contacting Kutou and asking to be recalled — that this mission was more than he was able to handle — but then common sense returned and he snorted at his own cowardice, shaking his head disparagingly.

“This *will not do*.” He repeated. “I must focus. I must dress and wash and prepare to command the men who rely on me. No wonder Kayu is on edge, if I allow myself such moments of weakness. Today I will go to the mountain and then it will be over with. Behind me. I need never return there again, and those memories will cease to plague me so much. At least I will go alone, and no one can see how difficult the errand has become. It is better that way. Kayu and the other soldiers are capable of surveilling the surrounding area and I will send Suiko and Kitora with them once again, to ensure the mages are kept out of trouble.”

He frowned, forcing his mind onto this new topic.

“Should I send Suiko with Kayu?” He wondered, then he shook his head. “No. The boy may be on edge, but there is no concealing the fact he has a measure of control over Kitora, and no fear of her aggression. Such a man is better left in charge of the wilder beast... I will have to trust him and hope that he comes to grips with his concerns soon. In fairness, he has done his duty to the letter since we have been here. I should not doubt — perhaps, in the end, it is simply just my paranoia after all. I am infecting those around me — another good reason why I should tackle Koku-zan alone.”

He nodded as if to convince himself, getting to his feet as he moved to the small smoky glass mirror that the room boasted. He glanced at his reflection in the rising sunlight, his amethyst eyes narrowing as he caught sight of the faint scar on his pale cheek. Gently he ran his finger over it.

“After so many years it has begun to fade.” He murmured. “And with the nature of Meihi skin, it does not stand out so much as it did when first I was branded with it. Yet... the scar runs more deeply within me than just a mark on my face. Maybe a slave is never truly a free man after all. Perhaps if I remembered more about that time, and less about the slaughter of my family, I would be somewhat the wiser regarding that fact.”

He grimaced, turning away from the mirror.

“But it seems you cannot pick and choose your nightmares.” He murmured. “So much the pity. I learnt to school my feelings when I was under Kaiga Gin’s control — I had no such skills when the village

was destroyed. Still, even so... it would be better to not remember any of it. To be able to sever all of that life. The people are gone — the good and the bad. But who knows? Perhaps I will finally be able to do that, when the Emperor's will is fulfilled. When Kutou has peace... will I have it, too? Or am I condemned to spend all of my life simply existing instead of living because of the shadows that haunt my past?"

"So if we keep following the river north, we'll end up in Yukigase about midday tomorrow?"

Hikari cast Aoiketsu a questioning glance, as he carefully helped her down from the horse, nodding his head as he offered her a rueful smile.

"Pretty sure." He agreed. "The river's course is pretty direct. So long as we don't forget to leave it when it forks towards the East, we should be fine."

"I don't think anyone's ever crossed Kounan quite as quickly without Chichiri's magic hat before." Shishi remarked, twisting her horse's reins through her fingers as she patted the tired animal gently on the nose. "If we keep riding at this pace, Aoi, we're going to have horses minus hooves."

"But we are in a hurry." Myoume dismounted her own horse, looking grave. "So it's a risk we have to take."

Aoiketsu pursed his lips, glancing around him at the small town at which they had arrived just twenty minutes earlier. It had not been marked on Chichiri's map, but Aoiketsu had seen a clear tracking path off to the right and he had taken a gamble, aware that they still needed somewhere to rest for the night. He had been relieved to see his hunch had paid off, and as he took in his surroundings, he realised why the settlement was not sketched onto the old navigation parchment.

"This town's not been here very long, has it?" Shishi voiced his own thoughts, her bronze eyes narrowing thoughtfully. "It looks like it's built up here since the war... that must be why it wasn't on the map."

"That's what I think, too." Aoiketsu agreed. "But thanks to those tracks, we found it. I suppose it's in a good place for market trading. After all, Yukigase and the border aren't really that far in relative terms. And I really do think that if we break our journey here now, we should be able to reach that place by tomorrow afternoon. The horses aren't the only ones who need a break, after all."

“No kidding.” Hikari rubbed her stiff back ruefully. “I’m going to ache forever after this trip. I’ve never been so glad to set foot on solid ground.”

“But you were all right, riding with me again today?” Aoiketsu shot her a hesitant glance, and Hikari smiled, nodding her head.

“Yes.” She agreed. “Besides, there wasn’t a lot of choice. And you’re a good rider, Aoi-kun. So I trust you not to let me fall.”

“Yeah...” Aoiketsu chewed absently on his bottom lip. “Well, at least you trust me to do something... that’s a start.”

Hikari frowned.

“Don’t.” She murmured. “I’m not mad any more — at least, I don’t think I am. But don’t look at me like that. It hurts, when you do. And it shouldn’t be me who’s hurt — because I’ve not done anything wrong. You have to give me some time to get to grips with all of this stuff... I need to know who Kaiga Aoiketsu really is.”

Aoiketsu sighed, nodding his head.

“I know you do. It’s fine.” He said resignedly, his memory flitting back to that morning, before they had left camp for the journey north.

“I’ll ride with you.” Hikari had said, a serious look in her hazel eyes. “And I... I’ve thought all night about everything Myoume said. I’m not angry — but I need to figure it out for myself. So... so I’ll ride with you, Aoi. But don’t... we have so many things to focus on on this trip, and I’m confused enough. So let’s leave it at that — all right?”

“You really don’t trust me any more, do you?” He had asked her, and Hikari had sighed, looking troubled.

“I don’t know, yet.” She admitted. “To ride safely — yes. To navigate — yes. And I’m glad you saved me from those men. I haven’t been very grateful to you, but I am. It’s just... I’m not used to feeling like this about anyone. And I... I’d rather know I truly have the measure of the person that’s causing me to feel this way. That’s all. However you get around it, the you you’ve been so far hasn’t been real. And I want to know who you really are... before I give you my trust again.”

He closed his eyes now, forcing the thought away.

“It’s fine.” He repeated. “This Aoi is the real Aoi, I promise. And I’ll make it up to you. I promise I will.”

“We should try and find somewhere to stable the horses.” Myoume

suggested. “And also somewhere to stay for the night, if we can. The town seems busy, so it must be a market day — we should take care of that as soon as we can. Otherwise there’ll be no rooms left.”

“I still have the money that Pa... Kashira gave me.” Shishi’s hand went to her belt. “And Myoume, you said you had some coin too. Renting a room shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Then lets look for somewhere suitable.” Aoiketsu suggested.

“I don’t suppose you have any secret tips about inns in this town, Aoi?” Shishi asked. Aoiketsu looked rueful.

“Not one.” He admitted. “The only reason I knew so easily where to go in Choukou was because Maichu left a calling card for me to find. I’ve never travelled this way before.”

“But you have been to Hokkan, right?” Hikari looked startled, and Aoiketsu laughed, nodding his head.

“Yes. I’ve been to Touran.” He agreed. “And up the mountain that Chichiri talked about — the one where the cave is. Koku-zan. That part wasn’t a lie.”

“A calling card, huh?” Shishi frowned. “The spider?”

Aoiketsu nodded.

“It’s sort of a joke between the two of us.” He agreed. ‘Maichu was pretty much illiterate when he came to the capital to train, so he didn’t know how to write his name. None of his family really cared much about that... and he’d never learnt. We were room-mates from then, because we were both the same age, and the youngest. And I learnt real quick that Maichu had a talent for slipping out of difficult places and situations without getting caught... just like a spider disappearing into hidden cracks and crevices. So I told him his name must mean “Dancing Spider’. And he’s written it like that ever since.”

“Dancing spider.” Shishi sent him a funny look. “You’re weird, you know that? What kind of idiot spends time dreaming up Kanji for their friends’ names?”

Aoiketsu laughed.

“Well, I was trying to help him too, I suppose.” He admitted. “I had lessons from when I was five or six — from about the time I was transferred to Hyoushin-sama’s custody, pretty much. But Maichu was a good seven years behind me and he really wasn’t that keen to learn as much as I was. So it was to help him with his literacy as much as anything. All the soldiers in Kutou’s barracks have to at least be able

to write and read their own name, after all — I was just giving him a way to remember how to do that.”

He shrugged.

“Even now he’s not as literate as he could be.” He added. “He’s more of an action person — I suppose I’m more of the bookworm, like you first called me, Shishi.”

“A bookworm and a soldier, all in one.” Shishi snorted. “You’re a strange mix, that’s for sure.”

“Well, one day I hope to be an official.” Aoiketsu admitted. “To take the exams and be a part of government. But not till this is all settled. That’s sort of how it’s always been... that I was raised to be a soldier for Kutou’s sake, but that I was always going to be educated as a Kaiga son should be — to play a part in Kutou’s government, too.”

“Even though you’re not a Kaiga at all.” Hikari murmured, and Aoiketsu shrugged.

“Even so, that’s what I was raised with.” He responded. “And I don’t mind really. I’m not much use on a battlefield at present, so if I can have other skills... then I’ll use those to compensate.”

“Does anyone else hear music?” Before Hikari could reply, Myoume held up her hands, a strange expression on her face.

“Music?” Shishi stared at her. “Myoume, you’re being strange — you’re not going to disappear into some world of your own, are you? I know it’s been a long ride, but you were babbling about music in the mountains, and now...”

“It’s the same music.” Myoume whispered, cutting across Shishi’s words as she shook her head. “Can’t you hear it? It’s coming from right ahead of us — I’m sure it is. It’s the music that was haunting me in the mountains... the same music.”

“Now you mention it, I can hear something.” Hikari frowned. “Although I don’t know if I’d call it music. It sounds more like a dirge to me. No beat.”

“I don’t hear anything.” Aoiketsu shook his head. “Are you sure?”

“Maybe the two of them have gone crackers.” Shishi suggested, and Myoume shook her head impatiently.

“No, it’s real music. Not spiritual music — real music.” She said frankly. “Listen, the both of you — it’s faint, but it’s definitely real.”

Aoiketsu frowned, focusing his attention on listening hard, and as

he did so, he found he could pick up the faint strains of some unfamiliar instrument drifting gently towards them on the light northern breeze. He cast Myoume a glance, and she nodded.

“That’s what I kept hearing, back in the Eastern village.” She murmured. “That same sound. I don’t know what it is, or where it’s from. But I’m sure it’s a sign. We’re supposed to stop here for the night. I’m certain. I want to investigate a little more.”

“I’ve heard that sound before. Somewhere.” Shishi pursed her lips. “I wish I could remember where. It’s haunting and soft but kind of pretty. I think I liked it.”

“You don’t remember where you heard it?” Myoume questioned, and Shishi shook her head.

“Nope.” She replied. “It’s just there... at the edge of my mind.”

She shrugged.

“It probably doesn’t matter.” She said pragmatically. “And it’s stopped, anyway. Are we going to stand around here or are we going to stable these horses? We can’t investigate anything while we’ve got them to worry about.”

“There’s an inn over that way.” Aoiketsu pointed. “It looks like it has stabling room. How about Hikari and I take the horses and arrange for us to have rooms for the night? Myoume, you and Shishi can check out the music.”

“Alone time with Hiki, huh?” Shishi raised an eyebrow and Aoiketsu reddened, shaking his head.

“That wasn’t what I was thinking!” He objected. “I swear it wasn’t. It’s just — Myoume was hallucinating that music, and you’ve heard it before. That’s all!”

“It’s fine. We’ll stable the horses.” Hikari rolled her eyes. “At least, Aoi, *you* will — *I’ll* speak to them about a room. Shishi, give me some money, huh?”

“Sure, so long as you know what’s a good deal and what isn’t.” Shishi nodded, unknotting the purse at her waist as she pulled out a handful of coins. “Here.”

“I’ve been here long enough to know how to barter.” Hikari assured her. “It’ll be fine. And if Aoi’s with me, I’ll be okay. After all, I know how he can fight, now — if there’s any trouble I guess I’m safe enough. Besides he’s right... you two should go and investigate the music. We’ll stable the horses then come find you. All right?”

“All right.” Myoume looked relieved. “Thank you.”

“You make sure you bear in mind how thin the ice is you’re still on, okay?” Shishi said warningly as she handed her horse’s reins into Aoiketsu’s waiting grip. “Don’t do anything you shouldn’t to Hiki while our backs are turned — all right?”

“I wasn’t going to!” Aoiketsu retorted indignantly. “Don’t be stupid.”

Shishi smirked.

“You’re red as Suzaku right now.” She teased. “Are you *sure* you’ve got Seiryuu’s blood?”

“Shishi!” Aoiketsu grimaced at her, and the bandit shrugged.

“We’ll see you soon.” Was all she said, however. “Don’t take too long.”

With that they were gone into the crowd, and Hikari cast her companion a rueful glance.

“She’s still teasing you, even now.” She murmured, and Aoiketsu shrugged, a faint smile touching his lips.

“It’s all right.” He responded. “That kind of teasing... hell, I get that in Kutou all the time, from Maichu or Kayu or any of the other soldiers. It’s a different kind of teasing. I... don’t mind it so much.”

“Meaning?” Hikari looked confused, and Aoiketsu paused, meeting her gaze with honest blue eyes.

“It’s the kind of teasing allies share among themselves.” He explained. “That’s all.”

“Shishi’s forgiven you more quickly than I have, in short.” Hikari frowned, and Aoiketsu pursed his lips.

“You have more to forgive.” He said quietly. “And we weren’t going to discuss that, were we? Lets do what we came here to do. I’m not putting any pressure on you for anything, Hikari — not even your friendship. I told you — I’ll make it up to you and prove that you can trust me. You don’t have to do anything except let me. Okay?”

“Okay.” Hikari’s hazel eyes flickered with gratitude. “That suits me.”

“Shishi told me last night that you... come from the Miko’s world.” As they crossed the square towards the inn, Aoiketsu sent her a sidelong glance, and Hikari started, nodding her head.

“Yes.” She agreed.

“What’s it like... you know... there?”

“I don’t even know how to answer that. It’s so different from here that there’s no way I’d make you understand.” Hikari sighed, and for a moment Aoiketsu thought he saw a flicker of wistfulness in the girl’s expression. He frowned.

“I’m sorry. I guess you must miss your family, huh?”

“Mm.” Hikari nodded. “Although to be honest, I don’t really know much better what to do in that world than I do in this one. I wish I could say that the reason I get so confused here sometimes is because I’m not from here originally... but in some ways I think I’ve been of more use to people in the ShijinTenchishou than I have ever been in my own world. It’s difficult to explain, but in this world I have... I have Suzaku. And I can’t control the magic he left inside of me, but from time to time its made a difference. Like... it let me save Meikyo from Miramu. And... and defend Chichiri and Tasuki from Suboshi, when we went to Makan.”

Aoiketsu was silent for a moment. Then,

“There are all sorts of stories about the Miko’s world.” He murmured. “But I understand a little better now why you’ve generated such interest. Why I was sent to spy on you. Because people from your world are powerful, Hikari. They have the ability to change fates and save lands.”

“Or to let them falter and rot.” Hikari said softly. Aoiketsu sighed.

“I don’t understand the reasons why Yui-sama didn’t save Kutou.” He admitted. “I wish I did.”

“I don’t understand it either.” Hikari shrugged. “She and my mother are close friends — I’ve known her my whole life. And she’s a good person. A really good person. I like her... I always have. She understands things that even Mother maybe doesn’t at first. Chichiri said that they had a fight and wound up caught in some kind of struggle between Kutou and Kounan. He also said that Nakago had something to do with it, but even he doesn’t really understand, I don’t think. I’m not sure anyone in Kounan really knows what it’s been like in the East. But whatever Yui-san and her Seishi did do, it was just... it didn’t work right. That’s all, I suppose. She made her wishes... whatever they were... and she believed she acted for the best when she did.”

“Nakago.” Aoiketsu’s eyes narrowed, and Hikari bit her lip.

“I’m sorry.” She said awkwardly. “I keep forgetting that’s your father I’m talking about.”

“He’s just a name, really. Nothing else.” Aoiketsu shook his head. “Like most of the people in my past — they’re all just names. It’s all right. I don’t know what to think of him myself, to be honest. I never have. Even now, as his son... I don’t know what I think.”

“But... you do know that... my father was the one who...?” Hikari hesitated, and Aoiketsu nodded.

“I know.” He agreed.

“It doesn’t make you angry?”

“At you?” Aoiketsu looked startled. “Of course not. Your father did it, not you. Besides, I’m a soldier, Hikari. I know that there are rules of war and rules of peace. In a war situation — in a battle — you face the enemy and it’s kill or be killed. My father slew Kounan’s Emperor... Lord Saihitei. Your father brought down mine, the Shougun of Kutou. That’s what happens in wartime. People die. People kill. The ones who don’t perish are the ones who win. That’s all.”

Hikari’s eyes narrowed and Aoiketsu could tell she was mulling this over.

“That’s the Aoi I didn’t know before.” She admitted, raising her gaze to his. “The one who speaks like a fighter. The same one who went at those men as if he was willing to kill them to save me. I’m not sure how I feel about him, yet... to be honest with you.”

Aoiketsu nodded slowly.

“I get that.” He agreed. “But it’s difficult to grow up in a country like Kutou without some concept of fighting, Hikari.”

“It’s really that serious a situation there?”

“I grew up at a court wracked by suspicion, deceit and civil unrest.” Aoiketsu said soberly. “I can’t count the number of plots on the Emperor’s life that Hyoushin-sama unearthed and defeated. I don’t know how many of the men who trained with me when I was a young boy were dispatched to man garrisons and defence points or how many of those died in the name of the Emperor. It’s just how things are, that’s all. You grow up with it, you get used to it. I don’t pretend I like it — but it makes you very close to the people you have immediately around you. Maichu, Kayu, and the others... Hyoushin-sama, too. They become your family even more, because you know

one day in battle you might rely on them for your life. That's how you're taught... that's how it is."

Hikari's eyes widened, and at first she did not speak. Then she smiled.

"Maybe I'm wrong." She reflected. "Maybe the Aoi I knew in Kounan is part of this Aoi, too."

Aoiketsu looked startled, then he shrugged.

"Maybe." He admitted. "I guess we'll both see as time goes on, won't we?"

Chapter 13

Chapter Twelve

Meanwhile, in the centre of the small market town, Shishi and Myoume had agreed to go their separate ways, each heading in a different direction as they sought to find the source of the strange, eerie music. As Shishi darted between the streets and alleys, she found herself wondering where she could have heard such a sound before, and most of all, why it had so attracted the Seishi's attention.

"She was half out of it. Like I've seen Hiki, when Suzaku's been inside of her." She muttered, neatly dodging a puddle as she scanned the surrounding area for any clues. "I hope she'll be all right on her own. Seishi or not, she's strange sometimes... and she really didn't seem like she totally knew what was happening. Like that music put a spell on her — or maybe it's just something about Toroki's sight. Either way, though... maybe we should have stuck together."

She leant up against the wall of a nearby building, considering for a moment whether or not to track back through the crowd and find their unpredictable companion.

"She was concerned about me going off alone, but I'm a bandit and I can use my sword if I need to." She murmured, resting her hand absently on the hilt of her weapon as she did so. "But Myoume's power is to see the future. What other power does she even have, anyway? *Could* she fight off an enemy? Maybe I should head back. Aoi and Hiki will be coming into the centre soon anyway, so it won't matter if... hey, wait a minute! Is that a... *circus* wagon? Circuses have musicians, don't they? Maybe I've come the right way after all."

Myoume forgotten, the young bandit darted across the cobbles towards the brightly painted blue and gold wagon, taking in the garish images that adorned the sides. It was parked in what was obviously one of the rougher areas of the town, outside the gaze of the dutiful city patrols, and from the condition of the buildings around her, Shishi suspected that it was not the kind of place people entered unless they had a specific reason for doing so.

"And the kind of reason people probably get rough over, too." She mused grimly. "Oh well. Keep on your toes, Shishi — you never know what you might find in a place like this."

As she drew closer, she heard the sound of voices, and her brow furrowed as she recognised the distinctive sound of an Eastern accent.

“From Kutou?” She murmured. “Friends of Aoi’s, or something else?”

She hesitated, then shook her head.

“Aoi said that his friend would meet him in Yukigase.” She reminded herself. “Of course, that might have been a lie, too... but... no. I think I believe him. Things make sense now — I don’t think he’s made that up.”

She inched carefully around the side of the alley, her quick bronze gaze absorbing the sight before her and despite the serious nature of her mission, she could not completely quell her curiosity. Her mother had once lived among circus folk, she knew, and for that reason it had always fascinated her, to see the kind of world Anzu had originally come from.

“A circus from the East in a North Kounan town.” She reflected. “That has to be a coincidence, right? But if so, why is Myoume so fixated on that music? Unless it is a coincidence and it didn’t come from here at all. But the town isn’t that big. Surely there isn’t anywhere else for it to come from?”

“Are you lost, musume-chan?”

A soft voice came from behind her, and she swung around, sword more than half drawn before she faced the speaker. As she met his gaze, however, she faltered, eyes widening in surprise as she took in his unusual appearance. He was pale as the moon, thick, lustreless silver hair hanging lank and unkempt down each side of his face, and the lines across his brow told of aging beyond his years. His amethyst eyes were clouded and dull, but as they surveyed her, they glimmered with the faintest hint of life. He was robed in old, blue fabric, worn and ripped in places, but still intact enough to be unfamiliar to her in its style, and his feet, calloused and scarred were bare against the cool ground. In one hand he held a wooden instrument that looked a little like a nikou, yet smaller and more carefully carved, and something about it flickered against Shishi’s senses, as if she had once encountered such a thing before.

At her hesitation, his thin lips curled into a smile, and he held up his hands in an evident gesture of peace.

“Well.” He murmured, the odd ring of his accent strange yet soothing to her ears. “The spirit of the lion. The lion cub from the

mountain town — Shishi, is it not?”

At the sound of her name, Shishi froze, eyes widening in astonishment, and the apparition slowly inclined his head.

“You have grown, child.” He said softly. “But you still have that spirit about you.”

“Have we... met before?” Shishi found her tongue, gazing at the stranger warily, and the man smiled another of his strange, disconnected smiles.

“A lifetime ago, perhaps, in a town called Souun.” He agreed. “When your father saved my life with his blessed flames. I’m not wrong, I don’t think, to connect you to that day. Your father is Reikaku-zan no Genrou, correct? Tasuki of Suzaku. And you’re his little girl — only not so little as you were the day you sought to help me in the town square.”

For a moment, Shishi stared at him. Then a flicker of memory danced across her senses and she gasped.

“The old man from the circus... you mean you’re that slave?” She exclaimed. “The one Kashira defended from those men?”

The old man nodded.

“My body is weak and old, but there is nothing amiss with my memory.” He said gently. “I never forget a face, Shishi. Especially not a face turned to me in kindness... there have been few enough of those in my life for me to remember each one vividly.”

“But you... you’re still with the circus.” Shishi gathered her wits hurriedly, staring at him in confusion. “Papa... Kashira was worried about you — that you’d go back and get killed. He and his friends went after you, to try and make sure that didn’t happen — but they couldn’t find any trace of you or the circus. So we didn’t know... if you were all right.”

“And now we should meet again by chance, some seven years on.” The older man mused, and as he did so, Shishi realised that he was not as old as he first appeared. With a jolt she registered that he was probably not much older than his middle fifties, and yet his lifestyle had aged him beyond his years and he had the stoop and demeanour of an elderly man. She sighed.

“You should have let us take you back to the mountain then.” She murmured. “But... that’s why I recognised the music. It was your music, wasn’t it? Your playing that we heard as we got here. I knew

I'd heard it before... it's not the kind of sound you forget."

"You had a good ear for it even then." The man agreed, a flicker of warmth in his violet gaze. "It drew your attention seven years ago, child, and it has again now. It's rare for my music to touch anyone outside of my own tribe — yet it captured your attention, didn't it?"

"I guess." Shishi frowned. "To be honest, I don't remember everything about that day. And a lot of things have happened since then... it was a long time ago."

"Almost half your life, I imagine... such things must seem long indeed when you are young." The man smiled. "So what brings you to the North, then? Your father is still well, I trust, and in charge of his mountain as much as ever?"

"Yes. He's fine." Shishi agreed, then bit her lip as she remembered the recent events around Reikaku-zan. "But my... my brother passed away recently, so I guess things are a bit strange in the mountains at the moment. And I... I'm here with friends. We... we're looking for something... at least we will be, if we ever manage to get out of Kounan. We're going to Hokkan — but it's a hell of a long way."

"Hokkan, is it?" The man eyed her curiously. "What could a southern bandit seek in Hokkan?"

"It's sort of complicated." Shishi said slowly, and the man smiled.

"I see. Too delicate a matter to confide in a stranger." He said, but there was no reproach in his tone, and Shishi frowned.

"You... are a Meihi, aren't you?" She murmured, and the man looked surprised. He nodded.

"Yes." He agreed. "I was born just over the border between Kutou and Hokkan — but I didn't think my people had reached as far south as Kounan. Am I wrong? The heat in your land can be oppressive for my kind — are there Meihi who have overcome such things to live among the peaceful South?"

"No." Shishi shook her head. "It's just... we met another one, on our travels. One from the East. And I was curious... that's all."

"A Meihi from the East." The old man murmured, then he shook his head.

"There are few of those now who are not in bond like me... or dead beneath Kutou's soil." He said gravely. "If one such has survived, and lives in freedom, he has been fortunate. The Meihi are a rare tribe these days... so much to the pity. It's a reflection of the way this world

has gone — that a tribe who lives in peace has been persecuted almost out of existence.”

He bowed his head towards her.

“It was pleasant to see you again, Shishi of the Mountains.” He murmured. “To see one kind heart in a sea of blank faces helps this old man to sleep at night.”

“You haven’t told me your name.” Shishi realised. “I didn’t know it then, and I don’t know now.”

“You want my name?” The man looked startled. The he smiled, reaching up to touch the girl’s cheek with a wizened, bony finger.

“You know how many years it has been since anyone cared to ask me my name?” He murmured, and Shishi was struck by the genuine emotion in his tone. “Slaves are not people, so we lack names. But to you, I’m not a slave, am I?”

“I don’t believe in slavery.” Shishi said frankly, and the man nodded.

“Such is the way of the South.” He reflected. ‘Well, then. I will tell you. My name is Bachisu. In my own language it means “Song of the Snow’. My brother and I were both born during a Hokkan blizzard, and so my mother named me. Myself,” Ba Chisu “and my brother,” Ba Karu “—” Guardian of Snow “. I do not know if he still lives... perhaps one day I will discover the answer.”

“Hey, you there!”

Before Shishi could reply to this surprising and random fragment of information, a yell came from the end of the street and instinctively the Meihi musician tensed, anxiety flickering in his amethyst eyes as they turned to face the speakers.

“You should not linger here.” He hissed, as Shishi registered the approach of two well-built, angry looking men, each dressed in rough circus wear and armed with blades and whips at the waist. “They might harm you — go now, while you still have time to outpace them.”

“Those are the guys Papa fought before.” Recollection sparked in Shishi’s senses and she frowned, shaking her head. “No way am I running away from those rejects. Papa didn’t, and nor will I — I’m not afraid of them!”

“Who are you, girl?” By this point the men were almost upon them, and Shishi steeled herself, gazing up at them defiantly.

“None of your business.” She snapped out. “A citizen of Kounan, which is more than either of you are!”

“Why are you speaking so closely to this child, slave?” The second man gave the fragile Meihi a hefty shove and the older man went sprawling in the dust, dropping his instrument with a clatter. “You have no right to speak to anyone unless we say so — or did you not get that message drummed into you already?”

“Leave him alone!” Anger flared in Shishi’s young heart and she drew her sword, placing herself between the men and the startled Meihi. “He’s a person, not just a piece of trash you can kick around!”

“A piece of trash we own, musume.” The first man glared at her darkly. “And by the looks of you, *you’re* nothing more than a local pick-pocket out for takings. Is that what this is? Some kind of scam to rip off our profits? Come to think of it, you’re dressed like you’re looking for trouble. I know all about Southern bandits, kid, and believe me, I’m not in the mood to listen to them.”

“My father tried to set fire to you once already.” Shishi snapped, realising as soon as she’d said it that revealing that information was probably not her wisest course of action. “If you hurt me he’ll do the same thing again... so unless you want to be chargrilled, you’ll back off and leave us alone!”

“Your father...” The second man’s eyes narrowed, and the two circus owners exchanged glances. A twitch of a smile flickered at the corner of the first man’s mouth, and he nodded his head.

“Well, well.” He murmured. “So *you’re* the brat of that fire-throwing hothead who rules the South-west as if he were a Lord and not just a local rogue? I see. That’s interesting to know.”

“He cost us good money in that town, seven years ago.” The second man agreed. “That kind of damage isn’t something you forget. But opportunities for revenge don’t arise often. Yet here you are... right in our hands.”

“Shishi, leave this place!” Bachisu struggled into a sitting position, his voice hoarse and gasping from his fall. “Quickly, while you still can!”

“Noone’s going anywhere.” The first man shook his head, as thick hands reached out to grab Shishi firmly by the shoulders. Shishi’s reflexes were quick, but with the strength of two men over her she found herself unable to fight back, and as the grip tightened, her sword was knocked from her grasp, clattering to the cobbles below.

“I guess this will go some way towards our lost takings.” The second man ripped the money pouch from her belt, glancing at it then slipping it into his coat. “And as for you... we’ll decide what to do with *you* later.”

He kicked out at Bachisu, then grabbed the man by the collar of his clothing, hauling him to his feet. Bachisu protested weakly, but he was no match for the men either, and even as Shishi struggled, she knew that her attempts were fruitless. As the first man’s hand clamped firmly over her mouth, forcing her jaw closed to prevent her from screaming, she found herself unceremoniously hoisted up off her feet, and carried the short few paces towards a ramshackle building which the circus had obviously made its base. Though Shishi was aware that the scene was being witnessed by other circus performers, none of them seemed either interested or inclined to help them, and indignation shot through her young form as she found herself tossed into a small, square chamber. The old Meihi was tossed in behind her, and then the door slammed shut and they were alone.

“Shit.” Shishi struggled to sit upright, dusting herself down as anger flared in her bronze eyes. “What the hell was that?”

“I told you you should have left.” Bachisu looked anxious. “They’ll probably kill the both of us, now. I’m sorry. It’s my fault for speaking to you — I should not have done so.”

“You do whatever the hell you like.” Shishi shook her head. “It ain’t your fault that those thick-headed bullies exist or that they order you around like they do. And what was with the others, huh? Why didn’t anyone help us?”

“Because they’re afraid.” Bachisu sighed, sinking back against the wall of the chamber. “Those men are demons, and they are both sadistic and cruel. I’ve reached the point where I no longer care what they do to me. But I am aging, and I have been in this situation a long time. It’s not so easy to frighten me as maybe it is the others. They still hold their lives dear — my own is far less important to me than theirs are to them.”

“That’s a bunch of crap.” Shishi said bluntly. “They’ve beaten it out of you, that’s all.”

“Probably.” Bachisu nodded. He offered her a smile.

“But I’m glad that not everyone acts or feels that way.” He added. “I knew seven years ago that you were possessed of a kind heart, Shishi. Now I know it yet again. That we should meet like this — I’m sorry for it, because I’m afraid for your safety. But even so — to have

met you again — makes me glad.”

Shishi glanced at him for a moment, taking in the glitter of tears on the old man’s cheeks, and she sighed, reaching across to touch his arm.

“I’m not alone here, and my friends will come looking for me.” She said softly. “When they find us, Bachisu-san, I want you to come with us. At least as far as Yukigase. Papa has a friend there — and I know he’ll help you. But you can’t stay this time — no matter what. And I don’t want to let them kill you — they’re bastards and it isn’t fair. Papa’d want me to help you — and I will.”

“Help me, huh?” Bachisu eyed her keenly. Then he shook his head.

“I don’t think that I’d be anything but a burden, even to the kindest of your friends.” He said pragmatically. “But if you do truly want to help me, then perhaps there is something you can do.”

“Something?” Shishi frowned. “Such as what?”

“I want you to get out of here.” Bachisu said simply. “And live.”

“That’s not doing you a favour.” Shishi snorted. “That’s sacrificing yourself and I thought already I told you...”

“I’m dying already, Shishi.” Bachisu shook his head. “Physically I won’t last another season, if my body continues to fail at the rate it already is. Your concern is for a man already doomed... helping me is not an option. No matter how kind you are... it’s already too late for that.”

Shishi stared at him for a moment, and then she sighed.

“Even if that’s so, I ain’t gonna just leave you here.” She muttered. “I’d never forgive myself, if I did.”

“Will you tell me what you were looking for in Hokkan, Shishi-san?” Bachisu asked softly. Shishi started. Then she shrugged.

“Genbu’s treasure.” She admitted. “It’s complicated... but... that’s why we’ve come North.”

“I see.” Bachisu seemed to be digesting this, then, “I thought Suzaku no Miko had already appeared in Kounan — and granted peace to the people there. Am I not correct?”

“Like I said, it’s complicated.” Shishi rubbed her temples. “But we need it, because if we don’t... bad things might happen to all of this world. So we have to come North.”

“And you know the location of this treasure?”

“No.” Shishi admitted, and Bachisu sighed.

“I am sorry.” He murmured. “Nor do I.”

“Why would you?” Shishi looked startled, and Bachisu smiled slightly.

“Once I might have been able to answer your question.” He admitted. “But I’m useless in that regard now. However, I might... know someone who could. If... if you can trust me to tell you the truth.”

Shishi’s eyes narrowed, as she gazed at him in the dim light of the chamber.

“What do you know about Genbu?” She asked softly, and Bachisu laughed.

“I told you, I was born just over the Hokkan/Kutou border.” He murmured. “Hokkan is my native land, Shishi.”

“Even so, Hokkan’s friggin’ huge.” Shishi objected. “How do you find one measly treasure in an expanse like that?”

“It’s near impossible without help.” Bachisu agreed. “And its not direct help I can give. However...”

He frowned, closing his eyes, and Shishi’s eyes widened as she caught sight of the strange dark mark that, little by little became visible on her companion’s brow.

“What the hell?!” She exclaimed, and Bachisu opened his eyes.

“Urumiya.” He murmured, reaching up to touch his forehead. “At least, *part* of Urumiya. You know the legend of the stars, I think — your father is one of them, so you should know it backwards. Urumiya is one of Genbu’s constellations. One of the protectors of Genbu’s treasure.”

“Shit, I know that.” Shishi murmured. “But... you... *you’re* Urumiya? For *real*?”

“Yes and no.” The man sighed, and the dark mark faded from his brow. “Urumiya is unusual in that the stellar spirit is divided between two souls, not just the one. I am only one half of Urumiya. The other half...”

“Your brother.” Shishi breathed, and Bachisu nodded.

“Bakaru.” He agreed. “He’s the one who has Genbu’s Shinzahou.

But I don't know where he is. We were separated as children — torn apart by slave-traders who took me to the East when I was too young to understand what it meant. I haven't seen him since then. Maybe because of that separation, my power has always been weak. I have never been able to raise it fully inside of me, and I have lost my will to fight. However, I have continued to search for my brother. Even though the search may be futile, and I may not live to see it out — if I travel with the circus, at least I have that chance.”

“That's why you went back.” Shishi realised. “But shit... if you're half of a Seishi, can't you *sense* your brother?”

“I told you. I am weak.” Bachisu shook his head. “From time to time I can feel the flicker of his life energy... but rarely. I'm not strong enough to muster any stellar power, Shishi. If I was, I would not be the prisoner I am.”

“But your music...”

“It's Meihi music. Not Genbu's.” Bachisu shook his head. “That particular song which so captured you as a child carries a faint spell, true — it reaches out to those whose hearts are truly good. That's why it touched you, Shishi. And that's why I'm willing to share my secret with you, even though I haven't spoken of it to anyone for years.”

Shishi frowned.

“Urumiya.” She murmured. “From Hokkan. But... if you don't know where your brother is — you said you thought... you knew someone who could help me?”

“Yes.” Bachisu agreed. “So you must listen to me, and listen carefully. Do you carry with you a weapon other than the sword you lost in the street outside?”

“Just a pocket knife for cutting food.” Shishi looked surprised, and Bachisu nodded, holding out his hand.

“That is enough.” He responded, and Shishi hesitated, then pulled it from her belt, dropping it into his outstretched grip.

“What are you going to do with it?” She demanded, and Bachisu smiled, holding up his palm as if examining the scars and marks that mottled it. Then, very carefully, he brought the blade down against his skin, and Shishi let out an exclamation.

“What the hell? Give it back — I didn't say you could mutilate yourself with it!”

“Calm down.” Bachisu shook his head, tearing a strip from his

beaten robe with his good hand as he pressed it to the wound. "It's not more than a small nick — just enough to shed my blood. That's all."

"But..." Shishi looked nonplussed, and Bachisu smiled, folding the cloth in two as he held both towards the young bandit.

"The Shinzahou is not the only thing that Genbu left." He said softly. "You're the daughter of Suzaku's Tasuki, so you must already know that there are two guardians for a reason. The Shinzahou and the relic... Kounan must be aware of both of these, I think?"

"Relic?" Shishi's eyes widened, and she nodded. "Wait... are you saying...?"

"Bakaru was charged with the Shinzahou. I was charged with the relic of Genbu." Bachisu nodded his head. "Unlike the other relics, Genbu's was not sealed in a shrine, but given to me as a baby. It is from his shell, carved in the form of a bracelet which I wore for many years... one which try as they might the slavers could not rip from my skin. But it was not safe, leaving it with me. So Doryoku and I both agreed to conceal it somewhere... somewhere where it would only be found by one who had my trust."

"Do... ryoku?"

"The mage spirit of Genbu." Bachisu responded. "That is her name. Doryoku."

"Right..." Shishi faltered, then, "And so you did have that relic, but you don't now? You hid it somewhere... and you're going to tell me where? Shit, you trust me enough for that? We're barely acquaintances, even if Papa did save your life in Souun."

"Ah, there are no strangers when a Meihi extends his trust." Bachisu's tired eyes sparkled briefly with life as he shook his head. "My music would not have touched you if you were not worthy of it, anyway. I have been waiting a long time to pass the knowledge of this secret on to someone who can protect Doryoku from enemy hands. It would seem that I've found her... that person is you."

"Wait a second." Shishi held up her hands. "I'm from Kounan. *Suzaku*. Remember? Wrong God."

"And I am a Meihi." Bachisu glanced up towards the ceiling of the chamber. "A culture which, in base form, does not follow the cults of the Four Gods or recognise them as overlords of this world. Yet Genbu still chose Meihi representatives to be Urumiya and guard his treasure. We are all connected, Shishi. Our beliefs are second to our actions in all this... who we are is more important than what we are born.

Doryoku will agree, when she understands why I've sent you to her. And if she can find Bakaru, she will. With Genbu's relic in your possession, I trust you will find your target."

He paused, then reached out his uninjured hand to touch her cheek.

"At last I have found a way to repay that kindness seven years ago." He whispered. "A Meihi must always repay his debts, Shishi, before he dies. Please let me do so... then at least, when my time runs out... I will be at peace."

Shishi stared at him for a moment. Then, slowly, she nodded her head.

"All right." She agreed softly, reaching over to retrieve her knife and the blooded quarter of cloth. "Then I'm listening. Tell me where you hid Doryoku's relic... and I'll work out a way of getting the both of us out of here."

"She's nowhere to be found."

Aoiketsu paused at the corner of the street, shaking his head as he cast a helpless glance back at his companion. "How far can you get in a few minutes, anyway? We found Myoume easily enough — Shishi must be around here somewhere, right?"

"Maybe she's in trouble." Hikari looked anxious. "Myoume, are you sure she came this way? Along this street?"

"I'm certain." Myoume nodded, a troubled expression in her own indigo eyes. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have let her go off alone, but that music was echoing in my senses and I suppose it clouded my judgement for a moment or two."

"Did you find the source of it?" Aoiketsu asked, and Myoume shook her head.

"No." She admitted. "But maybe Shishi did. She said she'd heard it before somehow, after all."

"Look!" Hikari exclaimed, gesturing to the path ahead. "Aoi, Myoume, look — a circus! Do you think... is that where Shishi's gone to look?"

"A circus, huh?" Myoume frowned. Then she nodded her head.

"I think that makes sense." She agreed. "A circus... would explain music."

“But that circus is from the East.” Aoiketsu frowned. “Right? That crest indicates it has the patronage of one of the surviving big families in the Eastern provinces... one of the ones the Emperor’s been trying to prove slave charges against for years but has never been able to. What would that have to do with Hokkan and you having odd visions, Myoume?”

“I don’t know.” Myoume said grimly. “But I think I just caught a flicker of Shishi’s life force in this area. Just the briefest glimmer — but I think she’s here. So we need to explore this more clearly.”

“Wait.” Hikari’s eyes lit up with remembrance, and Aoiketsu shot her a startled look.

“Wait?” He echoed. “Wait for what, exactly? What’s up, Hikari?”

“In Sairou... Jin... said something about a circus.” Hikari frowned. “I wish I could remember... what he said about it.”

“A circus? *This* circus?” Myoume asked sharply, and Hikari shrugged.

“I don’t know.” She admitted, frustration in her eyes. “Dammit, I wish Jin was here, I wish... he’d know... he’d remember. But... it was something to do with that ghost man... your Commander, Aoi. The Meihi guy.”

“Hyoushin-sama and a circus?” Aoiketsu’s brows knitted together, and Hikari nodded.

“Yes.” She agreed. “I... I think, anyway.”

She sighed, rubbing her temples.

“I’m sorry.” She added. “Jin... that was the night he died, and right after he said it he... he kind of kissed me and sent every thought out of my head except that. So I don’t really remember. But it was definitely something to do with a circus. And a Meihi.”

“He *kissed* you?” Aoiketsu’s eyes almost fell out of his head. “I thought there was nothing between you!”

“He was saying goodbye, Aoi.” Myoume said softly. “He’d made up his mind then... don’t get jealous over a man who’s not here, all right? What’s more important is what Hikari’s saying. You know Hyoushin — can you think of any reason why he’d be connected to an Eastern circus?”

“You mean, was he once a slave for one? Or could he be plotting with one?” Aoiketsu demanded, a faint edge to his tone as he shook

his head. "I doubt it. Hyoushin-sama was a slave for the Kaiga family. The Kaigas weren't involved with circuses. And he wouldn't be conspiring with anything that wasn't in his Emperor's interests. The family whose crest is on that wagon still illicitly keep slaves, I told you. No way would the Commander be involved with them. Stop trying to make things fit your suspicions, will you? You know as well as I do that that's all they are — that your 'sight' hasn't had anything to do with it."

"Stop it." Hikari sighed. "We need to find Shishi. Not argue about this. Besides, I've remembered something else. It was to do with Hyoushin — but only because I was curious about him. I'd never seen a man like him before. Jin told me about the circus because it was the first time he or Shishi encountered a Meihi — that's all. A different man altogether... but a slave, I think. He said something about... Tasuki taking exception to that. I think that's right, anyway. It was something along those lines."

"Then Hyoushin-sama isn't anything to do with this." Aoiketsu could not keep the triumph out of his voice.

"But Shishi could still be in trouble." Came Myoume's unsympathetic response. She glanced around her, aware that all of the circus people in the vicinity had noticed them, but were studiously trying to avoid making eye-contact, as if they did not want to be seen making contact with any of the local people.

"They don't look like the kind of people who want to answer questions, do they?" Hikari murmured. "It's like they're all... afraid."

"The rest of the town is so bright and open." Aoiketsu nodded. "But this area... you're right. It's like... they'd really rather we didn't see them at all."

"Which means they almost certainly know something." Myoume reflected. "But we probably won't get that information from them without causing a scene."

Aoiketsu's eyes narrowed.

"Let's cause a scene, then." He suggested, and Hikari stared at him.

"Aoi?"

"Causing trouble is the quickest way to draw whoever is in charge out into the open." Aoiketsu explained. "These people are too frightened to talk, which means there's someone to be afraid of. And that's who we need to speak to. If they haven't got Shishi, we need to keep looking. But the feel of this place is nasty, and I think Myoume's

probably right about her being here. It makes sense, if this is where she heard the music. Maybe she wasn't supposed to... who knows? But we don't have time to hang around being delicate if her life is in danger."

"There's the soldier again." Myoume observed, faint amusement in her indigo eyes, and Aoiketsu nodded.

"It's not just that." He agreed, taking a couple of steps forward as he bent to pick something up from the ground. It had been kicked almost entirely beneath a crate of old food leftovers, but the glint of the sun across it had caught his eye, and he lifted his prize, holding it up so that his companions could see it. Hikari gasped, her hand flying to her mouth.

"Shishi's *sword*!" She breathed, and Aoiketsu nodded.

"Blunt and unkempt as ever." He agreed. "Question is, though... where's *Shishi*?"

"And more importantly, what's happened to her?" Myoume bit her lip. "Shishi's not the kind of bandit to go anywhere willingly without her weapon — which means..."

"That she's definitely in trouble." Hikari whispered. "And we need to find her — before it's too late!"

Chapter 14

Chapter Thirteen

“It’s no good.”

Shishi gripped tightly to the edge of the window frame, turning as she cast her companion a frustrated look. “There’s not enough space for anyone to get out of there, and the window is firmly shut anyway. No matter what I do — not even with the knife — I can’t budge the catch.”

Bachisu glanced up at the single small window the dank chamber boasted, and slowly he nodded his head.

“I’m surprised you can even reach a perch like that. It must be a good six feet from the ground.” He murmured. “I would almost imagine you were one of my circus brethren, leaping around like that.”

“Well, my mother was a circus acrobat, once.” Deftly Shishi jumped down, landing neatly on her feet as she brushed the dust and cobwebs from her fingers. “She never taught me to do it, exactly — but you learn a few things, growing up in the mountains. My brother and I climbed trees a lot when we were children, and scaled the mountain paths and stuff... I guess I just got to be pretty agile because of that.”

She pursed her lips as her mind flitted once more to the absent Jin, and Bachisu reached out a hand to touch hers.

“I’m sorry for your brother’s loss.” He said softly. “I recall a young boy with you the first time we met. This was him?”

“Yes.” Shishi sank back against the stone wall, her eyes narrowing thoughtfully. “And dammit, for his sake I’m not giving up so easily. He died because of this quest — he believed in it that much he gave his life for it. So I’m damn well getting us out of here somehow — it’s not going to end as easily as this.”

“There is the lion’s spirit again.” Bachisu smiled. “No wonder you land on your feet, Shishi. You’re truly a cat after all.”

“A cat, huh?” Shishi glanced at her hands, looking self-conscious. “Maybe. Unfortunately, though, it looks like the door’s the only way to get out of here. And that means we have to wait for them to come to get us... and take them by surprise.”

“It’s dangerous.” Bachisu cautioned, hauling himself to his feet as he gauged the distance between the door and the wall. “Both men are well-trained with all their weaponry, and they won’t flinch at hurting a young girl.”

“And I don’t have my sword.” Shishi muttered. “Shit. This isn’t good. It’d be hard enough even taking them by surprise... but...”

She paused, turning to glance at her companion.

“You don’t have *any* of Urumiya’s power?”

“My last vestiges of power are in my music.” Bachisu said with a shrug. “That’s all I have. My music has the power to still others — calm them, or suppress their power. But I have never been able to use it effectively to do anything but entertain.”

“Suppress their power.” Shishi murmured. “But your instrument is outside too, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” Bachisu agreed. “With your sword.”

“So that’s no good.” Shishi grimaced, rubbing her temples. “Shit, shit, shit. I guess the only thing we can do is wait and see if my friends show up. Which means...”

She faltered, then her eyes widened.

“Hiki.” She whispered.

“Hiki?” Bachisu looked startled, and Shishi nodded.

“Yes.” She agreed. “Hiki... she and I... she’s... I don’t even know how to explain. But when Hiki went home, it was me who brought her back. Chichiri said we were connected... so maybe... she can hear me. If I really concentrate as hard as I damn well can — maybe she... maybe she’ll bring Aoi and Myoume an’ help us get outta this place!”

“I don’t understand what you mean, but if there’s anything I can do to help...” Bachisu began, and Shishi shook her head.

“I don’t want you to get any more beat up than you are.” She said frankly. “But it’s all right. One of the people travelling with me is Toroki — one of Byakko’s Seishi. And another is a trained soldier of Kutou’s Imperial Army. I figure that they’ll be able to take those two braindeads, if need be. At least... I hope so.”

“A soldier... of Kutou’s...” Shock flickered in Bachisu’s eyes, and Shishi grimaced, nodding.

“I guess we’ll call him a defector, for now.” She said wryly. “It’s the

easiest explanation... he's not *that* kind of soldier. At least... I don't think he is."

She frowned.

"He doesn't seem like it." She added, somewhat confusingly. "I mean, I think he'll help. Even if it's me and not Hiki in trouble... shit, he damn well better had do, anyway. Else I'll be having words with him too."

She closed her eyes, focusing all of her thoughts on her other-world friend.

"I'm not sure if this will work, because I ain't a Seishi." She murmured. "But dammit, I'll try."

"And your friend the Seishi will pick that up?"

"Dunno." Shishi admitted. "But Hiki — Hiki might."

"Hiki... is not a Seishi?"

"No." Shishi shook her head. "She's... she's Suzaku's Shinzahou, actually."

"Suzaku's..." Bachisu's eyes widened, then he smiled. "Then you truly are on a divine mission, my child, aren't you?"

"Damn right we are." Shishi agreed. "And I'm not letting some jerks get in the way of that. I don't care if they take my sword or my money — I can live without either, if I have to. But I'm not goin' to be killed here. I've got too much shit still to do, whether they like it or not. For Jin's sake... I have to get to Hokkan. An' even more, to Yukigase, now."

She patted the pocket of her clothing with a shrug.

"Now you've told me where to find Doryoku's relic." She murmured softly. Bachisu nodded.

"Yes." He agreed. "I'm happy I've entrusted her to you, Shishi-san. I think... I think she'll take to you. Doryoku's a gentle spirit — she always has been. I'm sure she'll recognise the scent of my blood and understand what it means. I always told her that one day I would come back to get her — or if I could not, I'd send someone I trusted in my place. In light of that... I'm sure she'll help you."

"She won't think I just ran you through and stole the blood?" Shishi looked doubtful, and Bachisu shook his head.

"She can tell the difference between blood shed willingly and blood

shed by force.” He replied. “She’ll understand my message... even if I am of no use to you, I’m certain that *she* will be.”

Before Shishi could reply, there was a loud clatter as the door was thrust open, revealing the first of the two circus proprietors. A dim slither of light framed his burly figure, giving him an even more sinister look, and Shishi bit her lip, instinctively moving between him and the fragile Meihi.

“It’s time we had some answers.” The man’s eyes narrowed, and Shishi caught sight of a flash of metal as he drew his blade from its scabbard, tapping it gently against his leg as his gaze flitted from the bandit to the musician. “I always knew you were trouble, old man. This is the last time I’m going to put up with your odd behaviour. No matter how much money your playing brings in — I won’t stand for it any more.”

He narrowed his eyes, jabbing his sword in Shishi’s direction.

“*And* your accomplice, too.” He murmured. “The daughter of the fire-bandit, huh? It couldn’t be better. I’ll slit her throat first, and then yours. How does that sound to you?”

“Shishi, get back!” Bachisu exclaimed, anxiety in his amethyst eyes as the circus proprietor swung his sword menacingly in the bandit’s direction. Shishi stared at him, unable to react in time, but for all his weakness Bachisu’s wits were not a bit dulled and he reached out a desperate bony hand to pull her back against the wall just in time to avoid the silver blade cutting her skin. The slave owner cursed, advancing on them, and Shishi scrambled back to her feet.

“You’re a bully.” She exclaimed. “And I’m not going to let a nothing like you kill me. You’re not even one part a man — and your sword would be ashamed of you, if it knew how... you can’t even hold it like a proper fighter and you think you’re going to kill one of Reikakuzan’s bandits? I’m going to throw fire one day, like my father does. I’m not just some little girl you can scrub out of existence!”

“We’ll see about that.” The man sent her a dark, cold look, his eyes like flint as he regarded her. “I might consider sending you back to the South in a box, as a special gift for that bandit chief... he shouldn’t have messed with things he doesn’t understand, and I’m going to repay that debt right here and now!”

He lunged once more for Shishi, but the girl was on her mettle now and she darted deftly out of the way, her gaze flitting anxiously to her older Meihi companion as she did so.

“Bachisu-san, the door!” She exclaimed, and the musician’s eyes widened as he registered her meaning. He struggled slowly to his feet, then hesitated, turning to look at her.

“Don’t stop!” Shishi shouted. “Get out! I’m all right — I can dodge this slowpoke forever. It’s *you* that needs to go!”

Bachisu’s amethyst eyes flickered for a moment. Then a strange look entered his gaze and slowly he shook his head. Instead of leaving, he clasped his hands together, closing his eyes as if composing himself. Then, very slowly, he opened his mouth.

What happened next seemed to pass in a haze for Shishi, as a feeble, yet distinct silverish light began to glitter erratically around the older man’s body. His thick argent hair seemed to flare out around his face in some imaginary breeze, as the dark curl of Genbu’s mark shone once more on his brow. But it was not the strange appearance of her new ally that started Shishi so much, but the sound that emitted from his mouth. It was neither a song nor a scream, but an eerie cry, long and unwavering, that seemed to pierce right through the chamber and up into the sky above. The chamber shuddered slightly, and the circus owner who, a minute earlier had been preparing a fresh assault on Shishi stumbled to his knees, the blade falling from his hands as he struggled to retain his balance. Shishi’s bronze eyes widened in disbelief as Bachisu’s odd melody seemed to double in force and volume, and for a brief instant, the silver haze stabilised into a true celestial aura.

“Bachisu-san.” She murmured, and the Seishi opened his eyes, meeting her gaze for a moment. A faint smile touched his lips, shadowed in his violet eyes. Then, in one brief, decisive moment, he spread his hands and the circus owner let out a groan, crumpling unconscious on the floor before them.

“Shit.” Shishi breathed, then, “Bachisu-san! Are you all right!” As the Seishi’s aura flickered and died, the mark disappearing from his brow as he collapsed to the ground. Shishi hurried to support him, registering his gasping, laboured breathing with growing concern.

“Dammit, what did you *do*?” She demanded. “What the hell wasthat?”

“Tell your father... his debt is repaid.” Bachisu murmured. “Go, Shishi, while you... while you can.”

“But... what about you? You’re more powerful than I thought you were — surely you can...?”

“It was my last gambit.” Bachisu shook his head, and Shishi registered the shadow that touched his pale features. “I told you. I’m not... going to leave here. You... to Doryoku... for my sake. Please. Go. Find your friends. I... for this world... go.”

With that his eyes fluttered shut, and Shishi bit her lip, swallowing the tears that longed to fall as she carefully laid him down on the chamber floor.

“First Jin. Now you.” She whispered, as she brushed her fingers gently against his throat, feeling the slow stilling of his lifebeat as his soul released its grip on his tired, worn body. “For my sake you risked everything — gave everything. So I’ll do what you say... I’ll find Doryoku. Not just for Kounan’s sake, but for yours as well, Bachisu-san.”

She hesitated, then pushed her hands together as if in prayer.

“I don’t care which God it is listening.” She added quietly. “But so long as one of you is — take care of him, huh? And Jin — if... if you’re there too, make sure that... that this guy gets a fair hearing... all right? For my sake... I don’t want him to suffer any more.”

“Consider it done, imouto-chan.”

The words seemed to echo out of nothingness and Shishi gasped, swinging around as if expecting to see her fellow bandit standing watching her, his usual, laid back grin on his rogueish features. But there was no one in the chamber except her, and she sighed, rubbing her temples.

“Stress and imagination.” She muttered. “I don’t have time for this. I have to get out of here.”

“You’re not going anywhere, musume.” A voice from the doorway startled her and she wheeled back towards the chamber’s one escape route, seeing that the collapsed circus-owner was beginning to stir, his fingers closing already around his worn blade as he struggled to his feet. “The old man is spoken for. Now it’s just you and me. And one of us doesn’t have a weapon.”

He smiled, a cold, cruel smile that chilled Shishi right to the bone.

“Well, well.” He murmured. “I wonder which of us will be left standing *this* time.”

“What the hell is that sound?!”

Outside the circus camp, Aoiketsu had stopped dead, his eyes widening in surprise as the distinctive, high-pitched wail pierced through the surrounding area. Myoume grimaced, clapping her hands over her ears as she sought to block it out.

“Whatever it is, don’t listen to it.” She instructed. “You either, Hikari. It’s a spell... don’t let it affect you.”

“A spell?” Hikari looked startled. “But I... I feel fine, Myoume. What kind of a spell?”

“It sounds like someone got run through in a particularly painful place.” Aoiketsu murmured. “But I feel fine, too. Myoume, I don’t think that, even if it’s a spell, it’s aimed at us.”

Myoume hesitantly removed her hands from her ears, frowning as she gazed across towards the dishevelled buildings that flanked the area.

“Maybe not.” She admitted, as the sound faltered and died. “But my senses are scrambled by it nonetheless. That’s strong magic, you two. *Stellar* magic. Be careful... we don’t know what we’re up against.”

“*Shishi!*” Hikari exclaimed, her eyes opening wide as she grabbed Aoiketsu by the arm. “Aoi, I felt her! I felt her here... and... and... you’ll think me crazy, but... I felt like... she wasn’t on her own!”

“Myoume, did you feel anything?” Aoiketsu asked. Myoume hesitated, then she bit her lip.

“Let’s go check it out.” She said softly, and Aoiketsu frowned.

“That was evasive.” He observed. “Did you or didn’t you?”

Myoume faltered, then slowly, she nodded her head.

“Yes.” She admitted unwillingly. “Come on. I don’t think we’ve time to waste.”

“What’s up, Myoume? Another vision coming true?” Hikari asked anxiously as they hurried across the circus complex towards the crumbling old buildings. Myoume shook her head.

“No.” She replied. “I’ve been picking up that strange music from before, but when I focus on it I only see snow and Kounan’s border mountains. No, it’s not that. I just...”

She sighed, shaking her head as if to clear it.

“Maybe it was that sound.” She admitted. “But I thought I felt... the sensation of a soul crossing from this plane to another one. A powerful

soul — a soul with connections to the Gods.”

“Shishi!” Aoiketsu’s eyes widened, and Hikari’s expression became one of horror.

“No.” She whispered. “It’s *not* Shishi. They can’t... they haven’t...”

“What did you feel, Hikari? When you said she wasn’t alone... what did you mean?” Myoume asked softly, and Hikari bit her lip.

“It felt... like... *Jin* was here.” She murmured reluctantly. “But... that’s crazy, right? I mean, even when he was alive, I could never sense Jin’s chi, and now...”

“Jin’s dead.” Aoiketsu said frankly, and Hikari eyed him in surprise.

“Aoi-kun?”

“Yes, Jin is dead.” Myoume sighed. “But the dead often come to get their loved ones when it’s their time to cross over... or have you never heard that superstition, Aoi?”

“I guess noone I’m close to has ever died.” Aoiketsu admitted. “So I... haven’t really thought about it.”

“You think Jin... *came* for Shishi?” Hikari took a hesitant couple of steps towards the building, then stopped. “No. No, it’s not that. Myoume, I’m sure of it. Shishi’s alive. I know she is. I can... I can *feel* her. Somehow... I can sense that she’s here. Whatever that sound was, it must’ve foxed our senses — there’s no way Jin could be anywhere, after all. But I’m sure about Shishi... and she might need our help.”

“Well, we should check it out.” Aoiketsu said softly, glancing down at Shishi’s blade which he still held in his hands. “I guess this is as good a weapon as any... not as nice a one as your *shinken*, Hikari, but it’ll do.”

“What are you going to do?” Hikari asked anxiously, and Aoiketsu gestured with his left hand towards the far side of the square towards where the other of the two circus owners was advancing on them, a dark look on his scarred features and a sturdy sword clutched in his meaty grip. Where there had moments earlier been a gaggle of folorn, drab looking circus performers there was now nobody except the approaching antagonist, and the air around them suddenly seemed to have become very still.

“*That* guy seems to want to talk to us.” Aoiketsu broke the silence. “And I have a feeling that his language of choice isn’t vernacular Chinese.”

“We don’t have time for you to play the hero. Not if Shishi is in trouble.” Myoume shook her head. “My senses are all over the place thanks to that sound — whatever it was — and I can’t sense Shishi at all. But if Hikari can, I’ll believe in her. We need to get inside as quickly as possible.”

“Tell that to him.” Aoiketsu said grimly, and Myoume frowned. She reached up to slip back her black glove, glancing at her hand for a moment, then brushing her fingers together as a glitter of white light shimmered around them.

“Myoume?” Hikari asked uncertainly, and Myoume sighed, shaking her head.

“I hate doing this.” She murmured. “But we don’t have time to mess around.”

She thrust her hand forward, the white glitter of energy flaring across the square and engulfing the advancing circus owner in its taunting, iridescent glow. He let out a yell, sinking to his knees as he clutched at his head, and Myoume bit her lip, closing her eyes as she sent a second flare in his direction.

“Byakko forgive me.” She muttered. “But if you must curse me with this power... I have no choice but to use it.”

“What the hell are you doing to him?” Aoiketsu demanded, and Myoume shook her head.

“You fight physically. I fight mentally.” She said softly, sending a third and final flare in the man’s direction, and the unfortunate swordsman let out an agonised shriek, clawing at his head as if trying to fight off some unseen enemy. “It’s ugly and distasteful. But that’s part of being Toroki.”

She lowered her hands, shaking her head as if to clear it, and then slipping her glove back over her exposed index finger.

“Let’s go. He won’t trouble us again.” She added. “We need to find Shishi.”

“Shit.” As they hurried towards the building, Aoiketsu cast a disbelieving glance back at the crumpled form who was still huddled and sobbing in terror on the ground. “Miramu was right. You do have the power to turn someone insane.”

“Yes. I do.” Myoume agreed softly, a troubled look in her indigo eyes. “And had I used strength from someone else, I could have turned his brain permanently. Since I only used my own strength, however,

the effects are temporary — the delusions I instilled in him will wear off, but not for a few hours.”

She sighed.

“Even enemies don’t deserve to be tortured in that way.” She admitted. “But Shishi’s life may be in danger. And she’s more important to me and to this world than a circus man with a sword.”

“It’s creepy.” Hikari shivered. “Myoume... please don’t do that again.”

“I hope I won’t have to.” Myoume glanced at her hands. “But for the sake of this world, Hikari — I’ll do whatever I have to do. You know that. Even if it means driving someone to the brink of insanity.”

“That doesn’t sound much like a hero’s claim.” Aoiketsu said acidly, and Myoume shook her head.

“I’m not a hero.” She responded. “I’m Byakko’s tool. That’s all. I’m no better or more morally sound than anyone else, even if I do have Toroki’s power running through me. Or have you forgotten that Miramu and I are siblings?”

“You’re not like Miramu.” Hikari said firmly. “But even so, please... I’d rather you didn’t use that spell again. Not on anyone. It’s not nice.”

“I’ll try not to have to.” Myoume said carefully. “That’s the best I can offer. I don’t want to use it again — but if I have to, then I have to. I guess time will tell.”

“And we made it inside.” Aoiketsu glanced around him. “Where now? Hikari, can you still feel Shishi’s life force?”

“Yes.” Hikari nodded. “It’s strange, because before this I never could. But it’s like that... that sound really... well... opened my ears or something. I can sense her really clearly... she’s off that way. And she’s alive... but I think... she seems afraid. So...”

“So we should hurry.” Aoiketsu said grimly, his grip tightening on the sword. “Right. We can worry about Myoume’s morals later — this is more important.”

“Well?”

Back in the make-shift prison cell, oblivious to the fate of his companion, the burly circus owner had cornered Shishi against the wall of the chamber, passing his blade from hand to hand casually as he gazed down at her. Cold amusement glittered in his dark eyes, and

despite herself Shishi felt a flicker of fear dart up inside of her.

“If I had my sword...” She told herself inwardly. “Dammit... I should have grabbed his up when I had a chance. Bachisu-san... I should have listened to you, shouldn’t I? I should have... I should...”

“Nothing to say for yourself, musume?” The man’s eyes narrowed, and he let out a low chuckle. “No last words for me to convey to your father, when I send him his daughter’s corpse?”

Shishi glowered up at him, clenching and unclenching her fists as she debated whether or not she had enough space to lunge for the blade. It would be a risk, she knew that, but as she considered her options she realised darkly that most of her other choices would end up in guaranteed death.

“At least this gives me a faint chance.” She muttered, tensing herself as she poised her body, ready to pounce. “My reflexes are quick... probably quicker than his, thanks to my growing up on the mountain. I’m going to try it.”

Her brows knitted together in concentration as she let out a yell, launching herself bodily at her foe and taking him momentarily off guard. As her hand groped feverishly for the hilt of the weapon, however, his superior strength overpowered her and she found herself flung back against the floor of the chamber, the sharp tip of the blade pushed up against her throat.

“Nice try, but I wasn’t born yesterday.” Her opponant said coolly. “I’ve made a living out of breaking people’s wills, bandit girl. You won’t get past me so easily as that.”

He eyed her for a moment.

“You move quickly.” He reflected. “If it wasn’t for the fact I want my revenge on your father, I might even coopt you into my circus act. After all, I’m down a player now... thanks to that useless old fool.”

He jerked his head in the direction of Bachisu’s cooling corpse, and fresh anger welled up in Shishi’s heart.

“You bastard.” She spat out. “He was a person too, you know — don’t you get that?”

“A person?” The circus owner snorted. “He was a Meihi. Don’t be foolish.”

He raised his blade, running his finger gently against the flat edge as he gazed down at her.

“Do Suzaku’s children also have red blood, I wonder?” He mused aloud. “I suppose we’ll find out... won’t we?”

With a sharp, forceful thrust, he drove his blade down towards her, and Shishi screwed her eyes shut, fear paralysing her momentarily as she anticipated the weapon’s clean cut through her flesh. Instead of sharp, driving pain, however, she felt a sudden haze of warmth flare up around her, and her assailant let out an exclamation. Shishi’s eyes shot open, disbelief flaring in their depths as she registered the scene before her.

Where a moment ago the man had been poised over her body, he was now a pace or two away from her, his eyes wide with surprise, and Shishi found herself no less stunned than her opponent as she realised the reason for his hesitation.

Between them, glistening in soft red light was a figure, translucent and hazy but still discernable in the darkness of the dank chamber. As her eyes opened wide with incredulity, the apparition turned, meeting her gaze for a moment, and Shishi froze, unable to speak as the being’s lips twitched into a familiar, reassuring smile.

For a second, Shishi’s heart stilled in her chest. Then, at last, she found her words, as tears sprang into her bronze eyes.

“J... J... Jin?” She whispered, and the apparition’s smile widened.

“*Help is on its way.*” The voice was soft and unsubstantial, yet unmistakable, and Shishi reached out a tentative hand to touch the figure, finding her fingers passed right through his. However, as she brushed against the light, she felt a definite sense of warmth and affection, and her heart skipped another beat.

“Jin... oniichan.” She breathed. “I don’t... you... I... why...”

“What the hell are you?” The swordsman had recovered his composure, glaring at the spectre warily. “Get out of my way... whatever spell this is, I’m not scared of you!”

The being turned his gaze back to the circus owner, and Shishi saw the same look of resolution enter his dark eyes as she had seen the night he had fought Miramu in the Sairou temple.

“*You can’t hurt her.*” He said softly. “*She’s Suzaku’s. That means noone can kill her. And so long as I’m here... noone will.*”

“I told you, get out of my way.” The man swore, sweeping his blade threateningly in the apparition’s direction. “I have a score to settle with the bandit of the south, and dammit, I’m going to take it while I

have the chance!"

"Shishi? Shishi, where are you?" The sound of Hikari's voice from outside the chamber startled the young bandit back to herself, and the swordsman hesitated for a moment, turning his attention away from his prey. As he did so, the spectre reached out his hand to touch Shishi's cheek.

"Help is here." He murmured. *"Stay safe, imouto-chan."*

"Wait a damn minute... Jin, *wait!*" Shishi exclaimed, reaching out a hand to try and grab his arm, but her fingers passed right through once more as his form dispersed into a shower of red and gold light. Tears glittered on Shishi's cheeks, but she gathered her wits, aware that this time she really was not alone.

"Hiki!" She shrieked. "Hiki, stop dawdling — I could use a hand here!"

"Shishi?" The door swung back to reveal the young schoolgirl, and relief flooded Shishi's heart as she registered both Myoume and Aoiketsu in the hallway beyond.

"You should have taken your chance to kill me when you had it." She said frankly, as her opponent's eyes widened at the sudden intrusion. "Now you've a bigger fight on your hands... don't you?"

"Are you all right?" Hikari hurried to her friend's side, and as the swordsman sought to follow her, Aoiketsu was between them, clanging the metal of Shishi's blade against the enemy's as he shook his head.

"You don't fight someone with one of those unless they're armed." He said reproachfully. "If it's a fight you want, I'll play with you."

"Hey, that's *my* damn sword, Aoi!" Shishi exclaimed, and Aoiketsu shrugged.

"Mine's in Kutou." He said unrepentantly. "Or wherever it is Miramu's taken it. So yours will have to do."

"What about the old guy?" Hikari looked anxious. "Shishi, who... what...?"

"He's dead." Shishi shook her head, blinking back her tears. "Dammit, Hiki, what took you so long to find me?"

"Just be glad we did." Hikari hugged her tightly. "We were worried when you disappeared like that."

"Myoume, take them out of here, will you?" Aoiketsu steadied his

blade, parrying the enemy's shot as he pushed him once more away from the girls. "Shishi looks shaken up and Hikari doesn't know what to do with that damn sword of hers. I can hold him — but I don't need distractions and you ain't using that spell of yours again."

"I couldn't if I wanted to. I used my strength already." Myoume shook her head.

"We're not just going to run off and leave him here." Hikari's eyes widened. "Not... I won't... it's like Jin, and I won't let..."

"I'm not going to get killed." Aoiketsu said smartly, his eyes narrowing in resolution and Shishi's expression became one of surprise as she saw a glitter of killer instinct in their seiran depths. "I'm not Jin. I'm a soldier, not a bandit. However brave Jin was or wasn't, Hikari — I'm stronger than he was. And this guy isn't Miramu. I'll be fine... just go with Myoume, all right?"

"He's right. Come on." Myoume grabbed Hikari by the wrist, slipping her other hand into Shishi's as she hauled the girls to their feet. "We'll wait outside... come on!"

"You're not getting away so easily!" The circus owner lunged at Shishi as the prophet tried to guide them out of the door, and Aoiketsu cursed, swinging his weapon hard against the other man's as he forcibly pushed him back.

"Don't even think it." He said quietly. "I don't want to kill you. But if you carry on like that, I will."

"You're just a boy... a boy in fancy clothing." The circus owner spat out. "Like you can kill me with a blunt sword like that, too... did noone ever teach you to take care of your weapon?"

"A sword's only as good as the person wielding it." Aoiketsu said coldly, as the circus owner's blade swung down once more towards him. "Myoume, dammit, *get them out of here!*"

"Hey!" As Shishi found herself forcibly pulled from the chamber, she cast Myoume an indignant look. "That hurt!"

"You had an opportunity to come by yourself." Myoume said lightly, as she guided her two companions out onto the main street, pausing beneath one of the shady northern pine trees that shadowed the pathway from the sun. "He's right — you're distracting him. I don't think he wants you to watch him fight."

"I don't know why." Shishi frowned. "I guess now I have to believe... that Aoi is a soldier. I mean... like that... I guess I've seen it

for real now.”

“Yeah.” Hikari agreed. “But is he right? I mean, *is* he stronger than Jin?”

Shishi opened her mouth to dispute this, then she sighed, shrugging her shoulders.

“I guess... maybe he is.” She admitted reluctantly. “But... but Jin isn’t weak, Hiki. He never was, and he isn’t now.”

“Shishi, we’ve discussed this.” Myoume said with a sigh. “Jin’s gone. We can’t change that.”

“Maybe he’s gone.” Shishi glanced up at the sky, a pensive look on her face. “But maybe he hasn’t. I don’t know. Perhaps it was imagination — perhaps it was because of that sound that Bachisu-san made... I don’t know. But whatever it was... I felt like he was there with me.”

“I thought I sensed him too.” Hikari said quietly, an uncharacteristically thoughtful look in her eyes. “Do you really... think he was there?”

“I want to believe he was.” Shishi agreed. “But who knows, huh? When Bachisu-san started that weird screeching it shook right through me — God knows what it might’ve made me see. But before you came... I swear I thought I *saw* him. That he... came back to defend me. Just for a moment. Else that jerk would have sliced me for sure.”

She sighed, resting her chin in her hands.

“Even if it was a hallucination, it was a nice feeling.” She added softly. “To think he might be watching over me, even now.”

“Who is this Bachisu-san, Shishi?” Myoume asked curiously, and Shishi sighed, her expression sad.

“The old Meihi.” She responded. “He... he was one of Genbu’s people, Myoume. That sound — was his power. He used the last of it to try and give me a chance to escape. Kashira saved his life seven years ago, and he wanted to repay the favour. I guess... he did.”

Her fingers strayed to her belt.

“He told me how to find Genbu’s relic.” She added. “And that he’d entrusted the secret to me. That he thought Genbu’s mage would... would understand and come forth for us, if I took something to her. He thinks she can tell us how to find Genbu’s Shinzahou... and I believe him.”

“One of *Genbu*’s people?” Hikari looked startled. “But...”

“Urumiya.” Shishi agreed. “Or one half of him. Myoume, did you know Urumiya was split into two?”

“Yes.” Myoume admitted. “At least in the original legend — the spirit was split between twins. Urumiya’s power was very strong — I suppose that’s why.”

“Bachisu-san has a brother, too. The other half — the one who knows about *Genbu*’s *Shinzahou*.” Shishi nodded her head. “That’s who we need to find. Ba... Bakaru. That was the guy’s name.”

“A Meihi as one of *Genbu*’s, huh?” Myoume looked thoughtful. Then she offered Shishi a smile.

“Maybe now I understand the significance of the music.” She mused. “It was him, wasn’t it? This circus — that Meihi. It was him.”

“It was.” Shishi agreed gravely. “He used the last of his strength for my sake, so I won’t let him down.”

“Aoi!”

At that moment the soldier emerged from the cracked old building, blade in hand, and as he did so, Hikari was on her feet, casting him an anxious look. “Are you... all right?”

“Yeah. I’m all right.” Aoiketsu nodded, tossing the weapon down onto the ground. “Don’t look like that, Hikari... if Shishi’d sharpen her damn blade then it’d have been quicker.”

“There’s blood on this!” Shishi retrieved her sword, glaring at him accusingly. “Did noone ever tell you that it’s bad manners to mess up someone’s property and then return it to them dirty?”

“I... I guess not.” Aoiketsu swallowed hard, and Hikari let out an exclamation, grabbing him by the arms as she realised he was about to fall headlong.

“Aoi...?” She whispered. “What happened in there? Are you hurt?”

“No... I’m not.” Aoiketsu sank to the ground, rubbing his temples as his anxious companion flitted around him. “I’m sorry. I’m just such a wretched excuse for a warrior sometimes. Shishi, don’t wave that in my face, please. I don’t want to throw up... not in front of you guys and especially not in front of Hikari.”

“Did you kill him?” Myoume asked quietly, and Aoiketsu hesitated for a moment. Then he nodded.

“I had no choice.” He admitted. “He was coming after you again. I had to bring him down. I did it in one blow, in the end — but I was trying to avoid it. I knew if I had to kill him, there’d be blood — and if I didn’t manage it the first time, I’d have been pretty useless to defend myself against him.”

He closed his eyes briefly.

“I’m sorry I gored your sword, Shishi.” He added softly. “But... I can’t clean it. Not unless you want me to pass out.”

“Shit, you really are a weirdo.” Shishi squatted in front of him, setting her weapon out of his line of sight. “You fight like the devil your father was, but at the first sight of red stuff...”

She shook her head.

“Still, that guy deserved what he got.” She added pragmatically. “After the shit he did to Bachisu-san and the other circus performers, he deserved to be killed a dozen times over. It’s no big deal that he’s dead. Not if it was that way.”

She pursed her lips, then,

“If its safe to go back in, then I want... to bury Bachisu-san.” She added. “Because he... I just think it’s right. Please. If you don’t mind.”

“I think so too.” Slowly Hikari got to her feet. “Besides, we were going to find somewhere to stay. It’s late afternoon, as it is... and Aoi, you’re a funny colour. We oughtn’t try to do anything crazy right away.”

“Shishi and I can bury the old Seishi.” Myoume said quietly. “Hikari-chan, will you stay with Aoi until he feels better? I think he’d rather have your company, anyway.”

“Yes. Of course.” Hikari looked startled, but she nodded, and Shishi grimaced.

“I guess there’s no helping you two.” She said resignedly. “Even though he’s killed a guy, Hikari, you’re still fussing over him like a mother hen.”

“It’s hard not to, when he looks like that.” Came Hikari’s rejoinder. “Besides...”

She sighed.

“I don’t like people being killed.” She admitted. “But in a way it’s better... than what Myoume did to the other one. And... and if he was attacking... I guess... Aoi didn’t have a choice.”

Aoiketsu shot her a grateful look, and Hikari nodded.

“I guess maybe I’m seeing bits and pieces of the real Aoi now.” She reflected.

“Well, I can live with the real Aoi.” Shishi said decidedly. “Since he’s got a backbone, I guess it’s okay by me that he’s riding with us. And I’ll even forgive him for blooding my sword and not cleaning it up... so long as he remembers who he’s fighting to protect.”

“I’ve never been so confused about that in my life.” Aoiketsu admitted. “But at least... for now I know that protecting Hikari is the right thing to do. And that means I’m with you — at least, as far as that goes. So long as, in the end, we can help Kutou too — I guess I... I’ve made the right choice.”

So that was the way of it.

Hyoushin stood against the sheer rock of the mountain face, his clever violet eyes absorbing his surroundings with a mixture of relief and frustration. Before him, the path that he and his men had ridden so easily a few weeks before was clouded in a haze of snow, a whirling blizzard of the kind that Hyoushin knew could conceal a person’s existence for days on end.

To push through the dervish of flakes would be the nearest thing to suicide, and Hyoushin frowned, knowing that — at least for today — his reunion with his past was out of the question. His climb had already been hindered by the worsening weather, and had been forced to tether his horse and continue on foot, and though he knew that the visibility on the lower slopes was not this bad, his instinct told him that the snow would probably have engulfed the whole of the mountain by nightfall.

He turned, slowly making his way back down the uneven rocky slope towards the sheltered rocky enclave where his white mare had been carefully tied up. After all, although his own body was fairly impervious to the harsh cold, and despite the fact she had been bred of strong military riding stock, he knew that his beast would probably not survive long if the freezing wind dropped any closer to her hiding place.

If he had believed in the power of Seiryuu, or even the power of Genbu, then he would probably have offered up a prayer of thanks. But, he reflected ruefully, he was a Meihi. And a sudden twist of nature’s forces were no more divine to him than he was himself, standing alone on the cold bleak mountains that flanked Hokkan’s

capital.

“I have wasted this day in attempting to climb through this weather, and it gets worse the higher I go.” He murmured, as he navigated a particularly difficult section of the snowy path. “It troubles me to so delay my Emperor’s errand... but like as not, my trip this way is futile anyway. If it were not for the fact this mountain once housed Genbu’s treasure, I would not even attempt to return to it. But to do that, I must pass through the Meihi settlement. And though to them, I’m sure, such a blizzard is nothing — I have not their winter weather experience. The last thing I want is to be stranded on this slope — I don’t know if it would be more or less trouble to have to spend the night alone in some cave than it would be to be rescued by the people I truly do not want to face.”

At that moment he reached the end of the path, turning back to gaze up towards the peak. Dark clouds shrouded it as the snow continued to fall, and he reflected that even though in other parts of the four Kingdoms Spring and even Summer had begun to break forth, in Hokkan’s harsh winterish climate the first buds of the next season had frozen on the branches of some of the mountain trees. Even for Hokkan, Hyoushin knew that this was exceptional weather, and he frowned, half-wondering if there was something more to this cold, long winter season than simply bad luck.

“In Sairou, it was almost summertime. In the South, from Kayu’s report, it was already that season, also.” He murmured. “At home in Kutou, Spring is making way for Summer even as we travel. Yet Spring has not come to the far north yet. Touran is still cold, if not so covered in snow... I wonder if this is truly the bleak weather my people originally fled from to set up home in the East.”

He frowned, a flicker of memory flaring against his senses.

“But why are we called snow-people, Mama?” His own childish voice echoed in his ears as he felt fragments of memory lock themselves together into one solid image. *‘We don’t live in the snow — so why does the Elder always say “Ba-Me-Ihi”? We’re just Meihi, aren’t we? I don’t understand... why does he do that?’*

“Because we live in Kutou now, musuko-kun.” His mother had told him gently, her soft violet eyes meeting his curious ones. “But once we came down from the Hokkan peaks. We are truly people of the snows, Lilaihi. Have I never told you, then, how our tribe came to be formed?”

The six year old Lilaihi had shaken his head, eyes wide as he gazed

on his mother expectantly, and the woman had laughed, touching him gently on the cheek.

“The stories say that a traveller was once lost in the northern mountains, imprisoned by a blizzard and unable to find his way back to Touran.” She murmured. “Such is the word the Hokkan-jin use for their main city. This traveller sought to cross the mountains, but in the snow, all the peaks looked the same. Finally he sheltered in a cave, cold, tired and hungry and certain that he would die. And as he sat there, awaiting his fate, he saw a vision.”

“A vision?”

“A lady dressed all in white, with skin the colour of the snow and hair the colour of spun silver.” The mother had nodded her head. “She called herself *Bali* — the snow maiden — and she was a spirit of the mountains. The man begged her to help him, and she agreed — but she told him that she would only save his life if he would remain there with her, since her existence was a secret that no one outside the mountains could know. The man protested, but Bali was firm — she would save his life but only if he would stay in the mountains.”

“So what did he do, Mama?” Lilaihi had asked softly, and his companion had smiled.

“Of course, he stayed.” She had said gently. “Because he knew that whatever hardships you face and whatever things you might be forced to give up, of all things you have your life is the most precious possession. And when he told her that, she kept her promise and preserved his life. He stayed in the mountains, becoming immune to the cold as he grew to understand the beauty of the snowlands. Little by little he forgot about his other life, and in time he and Bali became close. And so the first of our tribe was born, in the cold Hokkan snow — to the traveller who knew that all he needed was his life, and the spirit who was no longer all alone in the mountain snow.”

“Is... it a true story?” Lilaihi had asked slowly. “Really truly is that how it happened, Mama?”

His mother had laughed, patting him on the head.

“Only the mountains know for sure.” She had told him affectionately. “But even though we crossed the border in search of more fertile farming lands, Lilaihi, we are still the people of the snow. We are still the descendents of Bali, my boy... that’s why when our Kutou-jin neighbours may have black hair and dark eyes, we retain the silver hair and amethyst eyes of our mountain spirit ancestry. And we still live by the values of that traveller — that no matter how hard

life is, so long as we have life — that's what matters most."

Hyoushin closed his eyes, forcing the memory away.

Absently he wondered whether or not there were snow-maidens in the mountains today, and then he smiled ruefully, shaking his head.

"A Meihi fairy story." He murmured. "And I am not lost, in any case. I know my path back to Touran."

As he made his careful descent back towards the glittering, reassuring lights of Hokkan's principle city, he found himself ruminating once more on the story he had been so curious to learn as a child.

"I have always striven to live." He mused. "No matter what, I have never sought death. Even after my family were killed, even when I became a slave... I still continued to live. Maybe I shut out memories, or feelings that I no longer knew what to do with. But perhaps this is the reason I survived after all. Because a Meihi always seeks life over anything else. That no matter how hard that life is... it is too precious for any of us to waste."

He sighed, glancing at the faint scars that mottled his right hand.

"Life is as it is, and we must face it regardless." He decided. "Whether as a tribesman, a slave or an officer of my Emperor. And tomorrow, without fail, I must face my Meihi ancestry and visit that mountain village. If it hurts, so be it. If it distresses me, then it does. But my life was saved for a reason — for Kintsusei-sama's purpose, I was spared the Kaiga family's massacre. I have this life to do his bidding, and I will not run away from it again. Tomorrow, when the snow clears — I will go. And for Kintsusei-sama's sake, I will not leave the mountain until I know *everything* the Meihi folk have to tell me!"

"So what exactly did that old Meihi tell you, Shishi?"

As the group of travellers settled themselves in a secluded corner of their chosen inn, Myoume cast the youngest member of the party a quizzical look, her indigo eyes bright with curiosity as she rested her chin in her hands. It was some hours later and, having just finished eating, the quartet had begun making plans for the next day's travel. It had been during a heated discussion between Aoiketsu and Shishi as to the best way to reach Yukigase that the prophet had interjected her question, and the bandit frowned, tilting her head on one side as she considered.

"You mean about Doryoku, I presume?" She asked, and Myoume

nodded her head.

“And how to get to her.” She agreed. “Since you’re giving Aoi such a hard time over what route we’re taking, you must have a pretty specific idea as to where this relic is hidden.”

“Yes and no.” Shishi admitted. “I mean, Bachisu-san did tell me where he’d buried her. And from what Aoi and Chichiri and everyone were saying before we left... I think it must be the same cave as the one Chichiri said Nuriko fought a demon in, before the Shichi Seishi gathered in Eiyou to protect Miaka-sama.”

“In the Yukigase region of Kounan. Right?” Aoiketsu pulled out the rolled up map, spreading it out on the now clear table. “Look, Shishi. This is where we are now... more or less. Okay? This is the Shouryuu and this is where it forks away from us. This is Yukigase.”

He prodded the neatly scribed Kanji with the tip of his index finger. “And that’s the mountain range that leads to Touran. I don’t see how what your Meihi friend told you makes any difference to our journey. We still need to go to Yukigase.”

“It seems a waste of time to stop in Yukigase when we’ve a definite lead to take us to the Shinzahou.” Shishi responded. “If this mage will help us, we should be finding her. Right?”

“Aoi has to meet his friend in Yukigase, though.” Hikari remembered. “Otherwise the East will become suspicious and it could be a problem. We don’t want Miramu dispatched our way again — do we?”

“Hikari’s right.” Myoume nodded. “My senses are back to normal, now, but that shriek of Urumiya’s sent them all out of whack for a while. If Miramu had struck while I’d been like that, I wouldn’t have been able to sense him. Just in case there’s anything else — or for that matter, if the other half of Urumiya’s stellar self has a similar ability — it’s better we don’t arouse any suspicions in Kutou about Aoiketsu’s situation.”

“Besides, we don’t know exactly where this cave is.” Aoiketsu added. “Bachisu-san has passed away. Nuriko-san is dead, too — right? I think... when my comrades and I were in Hokkan before, I’m pretty sure we saw his grave, up on the top of Koku-zan. But this Tamatama person knows where that cave is. He could probably take us there more quickly than we could find it on our own... so we wouldn’t lose any time. And if you wanted, I could meet Maichu and you could go to find Doryoku.”

He looked rueful.

“What I don’t know I can’t be forced to lie about, after all. I already don’t know what I’m to say to him when I see him.”

“No, that would be a waste of time, too.” Shishi shook her head. “You won’t know where to find us, and we won’t want to backtrack to reconvene with you. You’ll just have to fit in meeting your buddy when you can, Aoi — because this is more important right now. With Bachisu-san dead, Doryoku’s in a vulnerable situation anyway. I promised him I’d find her... I want to do that for him, as well as for us. He was a good person — and those people hurt him so much.”

“We’ll find her, don’t worry.” Myoume rested a hand on the bandit’s arm. “Between us, I’m sure we’ll manage to do as Urumiya wanted.”

“He’s not Urumiya.” Shishi shook her head. “He has Urumiya’s power, but he wasn’t Urumiya. He was his own person, too. He told me it had been years since anyone actually cared what his name was. So to me he’s Bachisu-san... not a Seishi but someone who played really pretty music. A real person. Like Jin was. Someone else who I’m indebted to... in one way or another.”

“He really sacrificed himself to protect you, didn’t he?” Hikari murmured, and Shishi nodded.

“I think he knew he wasn’t going to survive much longer, anyway.” She responded. “But to summon the last of his strength like that, to force Urumiya’s powers to activate... he was so weak, he must have known it would kill him. But he did it to help me out.”

“I wonder what kind of mage Doryoku is.” Aoiketsu reflected. “I hope she’s nothing like Seiryuu’s mage spirit, Suiko.”

“Suiko is troublesome?” Myoume questioned, and Aoiketsu snorted.

“She acts like a spoiled child in a petulant temper.” He agreed. “She’s silly and sulky and she complains about everything she’s asked to do. Plus, she’s always annoying the Commander by saying stupid things to him and calling him a Northerner. She’s a pain.”

“Well, she was raised by your blood.” Myoume reflected. “You’re not a Seishi, so no wonder she’s defective.”

“You make her sound like a broken computer.” Hikari observed, and Myoume looked startled.

“A broken what?” She asked, and Hikari shook her head.

“Something we have in my world. Nothing major.” She said, a rueful smile touching her lips. “Just... the way you said she was defective — like she wasn’t a person at all.”

“She isn’t. She’s a spell — a mage spirit that takes human form.” Myoume shook her head. “She’s not actually a person. She’s guided by the will of those who control her — the blood of the one who raised her and the wishes of the ones who control her power.”

“I think Suiko would slap anyone who suggested she couldn’t think for herself.” Aoiketsu muttered darkly. “If Doryoku’s like that, I’m gonna be riding to Hokkan alone.”

“Bachisu-san didn’t seem to see her that way.” Shishi looked pensive. “He spoke of her as if... as if she was gentle. He said she wasn’t a fighting kind of spirit — that that wasn’t her power. I don’t know... but he hid her in the cave because he was afraid she wasn’t safe with him all the time. I think he knew he was weakening, and he didn’t want her falling into enemy hands. So when the circus sheltered in those caves on one trip south, he took his chance to hide her relic somewhere in that labyrinth. He says he sealed it with his blood, and only his blood will open it again. Which is why he gave me this.”

She pulled out the blooded cloth, and Aoiketsu grimaced, holding out his hand as if to ward her away.

“Don’t! I just ate... do you want to see my dinner again quite so soon?” He demanded.

“Oh, you wuss.” Shishi sighed, but obediently replaced the cloth among the folds of her clothing. “Honestly. Your appetite returned quick enough before — are you sure you weren’t just faking it to get a hug from Hiki?”

“*Shishi!*” Hikari flushed red at this, discomfitted, and Shishi laughed.

“I wish I was faking it.” Aoiketsu said darkly. “Believe me.”

“I wonder if that’s important.” Myoume reflected absently, and Shishi shot her a startled look.

“Huh?” She demanded. “If what’s important? Myoume, are you spacing again?”

“No.” Myoume shook her head, looking sheepish. “I’m fine. Really. And everything you’ve said about the cave and the snow fits with the random images I’ve had flooding my thoughts since we left the Eastern Village. Which makes me think that Doryoku must be where

Bachisu-san hid her — that noone's moved her relic since he was there."

She folded her arms, casting Aoiketsu a smile.

"I was just wondering whether there was a purpose to your squeamishness. That's all."

"Someone's sick sense of humour." Aoiketsu sighed. "Or wait, no — that was my mother... calling me Aoiketsu in the first place."

"I don't suppose she thought of it that way." Hikari shook her head. "Blue blood probably just meant to her that you had Nakago's blood — right?"

"Yeah, I think so." Aoiketsu rubbed his temples. "But it's come to have other connotations."

"Well, that's the thing I'm wondering about." Myoume admitted. "Aoi, when you had Shishi's blade earlier — you had a very particular look in your eye. It was definitely killer instinct... that you'd gone into battle mode and you were ready to fight. Weren't you?"

"Damn right." Aoiketsu agreed. "Although... that's the first time I've ever killed anyone in a fight. Normally I... it doesn't get to that point."

"If that's so, you seem remarkably okay with it." Shishi eyed him curiously. "Blood aside — you don't seem to care all that much that you stiffed a guy out on the end of my sword."

"What a way to put it." Myoume looked amused. "But Aoi's a soldier... right? The man was an enemy — an aggressor. Why should he feel guilt?"

"But Myoume — *you* felt guilty when you put the spell on the other man." Hikari remembered. "Aoi... don't you feel anything about it at all?"

"I..." Aoiketsu hesitated. Then he sighed, shaking his head.

"Not really." He admitted. "He wanted to hurt you, Hikari. And Shishi. And I... I wanted to protect you, I suppose. I mean, Shishi's good at fighting, but she wasn't armed. And you... Myoume said it. I'm drawn to protect you. It's just how it is. So... he... it happened that way. And I don't feel guilty because... it was just what I had to do."

"That's nothing to be ashamed of." Myoume shook her head. "But what I'm getting at is that your father was an incredibly powerful,

incredibly violent man when he chose. He had great strength and he used it — often to the detriment of others. Whether his actions can or can't be excused, he did kill many, many people. He applied that killer instinct of his and wiped out anyone in his path, no matter how small or insignificant. In short, I think, Seiryuu's magic drove deeper within him whatever rage and evil he already had there in his heart. He was a dangerous person. And you are his son. In your veins, your blood carries elements of that same Seiryuu spirit."

"I'm not a ruthless killer, you know." Aoiketsu reacted to this, anger in his seiran eyes. "I'm not going to kill at random, or mass slaughter a whole encampment of people just to take out one enemy! I was taught only to kill when killing was absolutely necessary!"

"Perhaps." Myoume agreed. "But even so, that spirit within you is strong. It rose in your eyes today, and I'm sure it has done before. It's why you're the fighter you are — why you're able to surpass your companions in the Imperial Guard. But... you also have a weakness. A fail-safe, if you like. You don't like the sight of blood."

"Meaning... Seiryuu made me this way on *purpose*?" Shock glittered in Aoiketsu's eyes. "*He* made me hate the sight of blood so I couldn't lose control of my wits in a fight and kill people the way my father maybe did?"

"It's an interesting thought." Myoume agreed. "Possibly. I really believe nothing happens by chance. It seems to make sense to me."

"I don't think Aoi could do what Nakago did." Hikari said quietly. "I mean... he doesn't seem... like he could."

"Aoi is not a cruel person." Myoume shook her head. "He's kind by nature, and that shines through even his military training. His squeamishness may well be a fail-safe, but you're right, Hikari. I don't think he has the capacity to act in the same way Nakago did. After all, they've had very different childhoods. Even so, Aoi-kun, if this is Seiryuu's will, so be it. You need to accept it and find a way to deal with it, instead of just bemoaning it. We all have weaknesses of some sort, after all — if you really want to protect Hikari, and save Kutou, you'll have to find a way around it."

Aoiketsu frowned, glancing at the table.

"Today I felt like part of your team. Like it was where I should be." He admitted softly. "I was worried about Shishi. Angry. And I wanted to protect Hikari. But... I'm Kutou's soldier. And I don't want to betray my Emperor. Because... even if what I'm doing, staying with you — even if that is to protect Kutou, in the end, if it's against the Emperor's

will it's still... treason."

"The call of the divine overrides the call of any King." Myoume said gravely. "Be it Kutou's, Kounan's — even Sairou's or Hokkan's. In the end, this is in your Emperor's best interests, too. If we succeed... he will come to understand."

"I wish I knew that for sure." Aoiketsu admitted. "But it's done now. I mean, the die have been cast. This is where I am and I've made up my mind. I shed blood today in Kounan's name. I've really crossed the line."

He held out his hands to Hikari, eying her solemnly as she cast him a startled look.

"Suzaku no Shinzahou, I will do whatever I can to defend you and your cause." He said gravely. "For Kutou's sake, but also for your sake, too. Because... no matter what the cost is..."

Gently he took her fingers in his, squeezing them gently, and Hikari did not pull away, too startled to react.

"I... want to be here." He murmured. "With... with you."

Chapter 15

Chapter Fourteen

Another day in Touran.

Kayu rested his hands on the sill of his chamber, a flicker of preoccupation in his dark eyes as he watched the sun rising over the snow-capped mountains. They had spent a fruitless, futile day scouring the local villages for any information on the Genbu Shinzahou, and had returned to the inn once more demoralised by their apparent lack of success. And yet, when they had reported to their Commander and awaited his own report, Hyoushin had seemed both unconcerned by their failure and unforthcoming on the results of his own trip into the mountain snow.

“All he said was that a blizzard made investigation impossible.” He murmured. “But nothing else. And today... what more is there for us to do? He simply said to continue our search at first light — but we’ve already covered most of Touran’s surrounding settlements. What else are we meant to do — interview the sheep?”

He sighed, sinking back down onto his bed as he considered the true source of his unease. Kikei’s enchanted mirror still lay untouched among his belongings, and so far he had been loath to make any kind of spy’s report on his leader.

“He’s my Commander.” He reflected. “And I... I don’t want to report on him. But then again — so many strange things have been happening lately. I can’t sit quietly and not do anything any more. If I just tell Kikei-sama what’s happened so far — no elaborations, just the facts — maybe he can give me some clearer advice. Either way I can’t just ignore it. Something’s wrong with the Commander, that much seems for sure. He’s more distant and strange than he’s ever been, and the way he reacted to those children is still bothering me.”

He cast a hesitant glance towards the door, knowing that Ouno might return to the chamber at any moment. Then he reached over to grab his bag, pulling it onto his bed as his fingers closed around the edge of the mirror’s gilded surface. He paused for a moment, then pulled it out, running his fingers over the shiny surface as he did so.

“Kikei-sama?” He murmured. “This is Kayu... are you there, Kikei-sama?”

The haze of the glass seemed to flicker and clear, and with a jolt of relief Kayu found himself gazing down into the eyes of his elderly benefactor. The priest offered him a smile, and somehow Kayu felt better knowing that his duty was simply to report, not to make any difficult decisions.

“Well, my son, and how are your travels?” Kikei asked softly. “I’ve not heard from you since you left — I was concerned.”

“I’m sorry.” Kayu looked sheepish. “We’ve been... busy, I suppose. And I wanted to wait... at least... I’m not sure...”

He hesitated, and Kikei’s beady eyes narrowed.

“Is this relating to your Commander, Kayu? To the conversation we had before you departed for the North?” He asked softly. Slowly Kayu nodded.

“In a manner of speaking.” He agreed. “I don’t know... that it’s... an official report. And I haven’t... I don’t have any proof of his... of him wanting to betray the Emperor. But there have been a few things bothering me... that’s why I wanted to speak to you. You know better than I do about these things — and about Hyoushin-sama and his past.”

“You’re a wise boy, as ever.” Kikei reflected. “Well, then? Tell me how I can put your mind at rest.”

“It’s little things, really.” Kayu sighed. “He doesn’t seem himself since we arrived in Hokkan.”

“Such as?”

“Today he sent us out to hunt around the villages near Touran, to try and find clues about the treasure.” Kayu responded. “He didn’t come with us, however. He said he was going up the mountain — Koku-zan — and that it was better he do it alone. He didn’t even let Suiko go with him, even though she begged. And when we returned, he didn’t seem to mind that we’d not found anything. In fact, his mind seemed to be on something else. He didn’t report to us about his trip up the mountain, except to say that snow barred his way. He’s said he’s going to go again tomorrow... once more alone. He doesn’t want to ‘waste people’ on a futile errand, he says... but if it’s so futile, I don’t know why he’s so determined to go there. That cave is empty, and we’ve already verified that... I don’t understand it.”

“I see.” Kikei’s brows knitted together thoughtfully. “Are you thinking that your Commander may have another errand than the one he’s been given for visiting the slopes of Koku-zan?”

“I’ve no evidence for it.” Kayu admitted. “But it bothers me anyway. And then there was what first happened when we came into Touran.”

“Explain, please. What kind of occurrence was this?”

“Ouno and I came back into the centre of the city to ask him something, and we saw him speaking to two children. Meihi, I think, by the looks of them.” Kayu responded slowly. “They were only small — no older than eight at the oldest, I wouldn’t have thought. But something they said to him... upset him. I’ve never seen anything shake him — not executing a prisoner, nor any hardship during travel or battle or anything of that nature. But something those kids said... he didn’t react in a way I’ve ever seen Hyoushin-sama react before. He didn’t know Ouno and I were there — we withdrew before he saw us. But it was like he’d completely let his guard down. He had his head in his hands... as if... those children had delivered to him bad news.”

“Bad news.” Kikei echoed. “I can understand your concern. Hyoushin is not given to emotional reactions of any kind... that two children should render him thus seems excessive. You are right to bring this to my attention, Kayu. I will consult with the Emperor on it immediately, you need not worry. You have done your duty well, my boy — continue to do so and Kintsusei-sama will have much to reward you for.”

“I... It’s not about being rewarded.” Kayu responded. “I just don’t want anything to happen to him. That’s all. Kutou has problems but if the Emperor was killed it would be a thousand times worse — I don’t want to see that happen.”

“Your concern is shared by all of us loyal to Kintsusei-sama.” Kikei said gravely. “Continue your observations, Kayu, and report to me again should you have any further information.”

With that the mirror clouded over, and Kayu sighed, sitting back against the wall as he felt a flicker of relief stirring among his senses.

“Kikei-sama will ask the Emperor, and it’ll all be sorted out.” He murmured. “And I’ve done the right thing — for my King, I shouldn’t let anything go to chance.”

He pushed the mirror back into his travel bag, getting to his feet as he heard the sound of footsteps approaching the small chamber.

“And that’ll be Ouno, so I’d better make myself ready for another day of hard slogging.” He decided. “I’ve done all I can now — it’s out of my hands!”

“Well well, your spy sure is predictable.”

Within the dim light of the Seiryuu shrine, Miramu leant lazily up against one of Seiryuu’s claws, casting the priest an amused glance as the elderly Hin turned away from the flames.

“I have to say I’m impressed with your methods, Kikei. You planted the seed of doubt in the boy’s head, and, just as you anticipated, he’s found adequate means to fertilise it. All at a distance, and with apparent compliancy with Imperial wishes. You are a clever man — I wonder if Kintsusei-sama realises quite how clever.”

“As I already told you, there are reasons that I survived the Hin’s massacre and others did not.” Kikei offered him a slight smile. “Kayu is also intelligent, however. And loyal. He trusts me — which, considering the situation, is a wise choice on his part. He has my protection, you see... so it’s a two way benefit.”

“I see.” Miramu chuckled. “So when you launch your bid for power... you plan on preserving those little rats you’ve snuck into every department and industry — the ones who’ve kept your hope of rebellion alive for so many years after the end of the war? It almost sounds like you have compassion for them — you’d better keep an eye on that, in case it clouds your judgement.”

There was a flicker of irony in his tones, and Kikei shrugged, shaking his head.

“You’re confusing compassion with pragmatism.” He said evenly. “A man never discards those who are loyal to him. He has enough to do discarding those loyal to his enemy.”

“Loyal to his enemy.” Miramu repeated. “Such as Hyoushin?”

“I wouldn’t credit him as an enemy, as such.” Kikei shook his head. “I told you — he’s a scapegoat, but nothing more. He’s important only because the Emperor favours him — he has command of the military but as I’ve proven with Kayu, not all of his men are willing to offer unquestioning obedience to his strange orders. The men he most trusts are currently out of the way, too — conveniently in the south. It couldn’t be better.”

“By which you mean Shi Maichu and Kaiga Aoiketsu.”

“Yes.” Kikei nodded. “Their absence saves the effort of having to have them removed, too... the Emperor is also fond of the Kaiga boy, for reasons unknown to me. And I don’t need to alert his suspicions if it can be avoided.”

“I’m glad you don’t plan to dispatch me to Kounan again, then.” Miramu said pensively. “I don’t really have any inclination to kill boys — even Hyoushin’s young sheep — with my poisoned barbs. It’s not easy to find the requisite materials in the East, after all.”

“So you’d refuse, then, if I sent you on an errand to slay Aoiketsu?” Kikei’s eyes became narrowed as he absorbed this. “The man who professes to killing anyone and anything without asking questions has formed an opinion about that boy above all the others? Is he really so fearsome a target? Or is it the reverse — is he too weak to even bother your assassin’s instinct?”

“I would refuse.” Miramu agreed. “But not on the grounds that you think.”

“I won’t believe you’re fond of him.”

“Well, you’re not being asked to.” Miramu said complacently. “Besides, I’m far more interested in his poe-faced Commander. Aoiketsu vomits at the sight of blood — he’s no threat to anyone so long as that’s the case, and as a spy, I would have thought his information had use for you as much as anything else. Or do you not want the location of Suzaku’s Shinzahou? That’s not information I could give you, after all.”

Kikei was silent for a moment. Then he nodded.

“I have an errand for you nonetheless.” He murmured. “Not one to spill blood, but to use your uncanny skills at entering and exiting private premises. I want you to steal something for me, Miramu — or no, a better word would be... *borrow* something for me. For I intend to return it, once I’ve used it for my purpose.”

“That sounds intriguing.” Miramu eyed his companion quizzically. “What is this item?”

Kikei smiled.

“The Emperor’s seal.” He said softly. “I have a feeling, after all, that I will soon have a *very* important letter to write regarding Kutou’s Meihi Commander in the North.”

“Finally, we’re in Yukigase.”

Aoiketsu gazed up at the quaint, unevenly spaced rooftops that rose and fell beneath the shadow of the mountain range, biting his lip as he gently stilled his horse.

“This doesn’t feel like Kounan, somehow.” He murmured. “It’s really cold up here... much more like Hokkan.”

“Well, the border isn’t far, is it?” Hikari turned to offer him a smile. “This is Yukigase all right, though. We stayed here on our way back from visiting Amiboshi the last time.”

“So Doryoku’s cave is somewhere in those mountains.” Myoume pulled her horse alongside, her gaze flitting across the peaks. “I’ve never been here before, but it feels like I have all the same. I’m pretty sure that this is what was bothering me when we were in the Eastern Village. Bachisu-san was the missing link in the chain — we’ve made progress thanks to meeting him.”

“At his expense.” Shishi said soberly. “So what are we doing now, anyhow? Are we goin’ to go try an’ find an inn, or are we goin’ to try and crash at Tamatama-san’s place again? He did say when we left the last time that Suzaku’s people were always welcome... but that only really applies to Hiki an’ me, doesn’t it?”

“Cheeky.” Aoiketsu pulled a face at her. “Myoume and I are part of this travel party too, you know.”

“And both of them are on our side.” Hikari agreed. “Even... even you, Aoi — right? I mean, you’re really going to stick with us now... aren’t you?”

“Yes.” Aoiketsu nodded his head. “Because no matter how I think about it, I think I’m supposed to do that. I mean, if you’re going to save Kutou...”

He trailed off, and Hikari offered him a smile.

“If I can raise Suzaku and be Suzaku no Miko to stop all of this from happening, then I’ll wish for Kutou’s safety.” She promised. “I don’t know if I can be that, yet — or if there’s another way a Shinzahoo can bring about that kind of thing. But somehow I will — I swear I will. Because if saving Kutou means saving everyone... I’ll do that. That’s why I’m here, I think — it must be, since I don’t seem to have any other direct purpose. So if I can use Suzaku’s power inside of me to save Kutou, I will.”

“Maybe when we find Genbu’s Shinzahoo, you’ll be able to use it and summon him.” Shishi suggested. “You’ve gotten stronger than you were, Hiki — if you hadn’t, you wouldn’t have been able to go home and back. So you must have unlocked more of your magic than you had when we were first in this part of the world.”

“Maybe.” Hikari agreed. “I don’t know — perhaps you’re right. I

can sense you now too, Shishi — I couldn't, before we went to that town and before Bachisu-san made that strange, wailing sound to distract your attacker. But now I can, almost as strongly as I could feel Chichiri, before. So maybe I am stronger than I think... maybe that's how I'm going to save everyone after all."

"We can't rule anything out." Myoume responded, gripping her reins more tightly in her hands. "And it may be impolite, but if we can impose on your friend for a night, so much the better. Those circus guys took money from Shishi and we didn't manage to reclaim it — so we're running shorter on finance than we were before. I think we'll be all right for Touran — I still have most of my family's blood money, after all. But I'd rather keep it till we're in Hokkan. If we don't have to rent a room or two — I'd rather we didn't try."

"We'll go to Tamatama-san." Hikari decided. "He's kind... he'll let us stay, I'm sure. Besides, I think he's lonely, too. He's all on his own in that big house. He was glad to see Tasuki and Chichiri the last time we were here, too. I'm sure he'll not mind us coming back."

"He's not married?" Aoiketsu looked surprised, and Shishi let out a snort of laughter.

"Decidedly not." She said, amused.

"Did I say something funny?" Aoiketsu frowned, and Hikari hid a smile, shaking her head.

"Tamatama-san is... unusual." She said carefully. "He... he's a man who... er... prefers to live his life... as... well... a woman."

"Awoman?" Aoiketsu looked dumbstruck, and Shishi nodded.

"He's an old friend of Suzaku's Nuriko." She agreed. "Papa... Kashira's always said that his brain was kinked that way too. Only the way he says it... I think it was kind of just the way he was. From what he and Chichiri have told us, Nuriko looked and acted just like a girl so as you wouldn't have known it either way. More like a girl even than you do, Aoi. Tamatama's not quite like that. But he's still... unique."

"I don't act like a girl, and I don't look like one either." Aoiketsu reacted indignantly, and Hikari laughed, resting her hand on his arm.

"She's teasing you." She murmured. "Didn't you say that made you feel part of the team, before?"

"Yes." Aoiketsu admitted. "But I hate it when people say I'm like a girl. I'm not."

“Nothing wrong with being a girl, Aoi.” Myoume said, amused. “Or do you want to argue it out with your travel partners, huh? You’re a little outnumbered when it comes to this particular subject.”

Aoiketsu sighed.

“I don’t think I understand girls enough to be one.” He said frankly. “All right, already. I get it. I’m done complaining. Are we going, now?”

“Tamatama-san’s house is that way.” Shishi indicated. “Towards the head of the village, so we should keep going. It’s not a big place, Yukigase — we won’t be able to miss it.”

“Where do you suppose your friend is holed up?” Hikari asked questioningly. “I don’t see any spiders in the snow this time.”

“Don’t look for them.” Aoiketsu advised. “I’d rather he didn’t know you were on the lookout for him, anyway.”

“Maichu is here, however.” Myoume said softly. “And you’ll see him tonight, Aoi-kun. Yukigase has only one functioning inn, and my impressions of your friend are that that is the place he’s most likely to await you.”

“You can sense him?” Aoiketsu looked startled, then anxiety flickered in his seiran eyes. “Or... is something going to... happen to him?”

“Not unless you plan on hurting him yourself.” Myoume said calmly. “No, Aoi. I haven’t any more to tell you on that subject. That piece of the puzzle hasn’t fallen into place — my wits are entirely consumed by snow and mountain caves at the moment. But I’ve met Shi Maichu and my instincts are strong. I can feel his life force in this village. He’s made it here safely... and he’ll be ready to meet you tonight.”

“Well, that’s something, I suppose.” Aoiketsu sighed. “Don’t put me on edge like that... you know I’m already worried about this. And about why Maichu’s so significant to you, too. You seem good at pronouncing death wishes on people, after all.”

“I haven’t said that Maichu is going to die, Aoi.” Myoume pointed out, and Aoiketsu frowned.

“Nor have you said he isn’t.” He said darkly. “So it’s not very comforting either way.”

“The future is what the future is. I only see it.” Myoume shrugged. “I’ve had no luck changing it, Aoi — don’t blame the messenger for

the things I predict. They're just there, that's all. Snippets of information — threads that tie people and events into a particular sequence. That's all."

She shook her head.

"Maichu is safe in Yukigase." She added. "But I don't think he would do well to stay in Kounan. This land is where danger lies... he would do better to cross the border into Hokkan. I feel sure that whatever is to occur in his future, it will take place on Suzaku's soil."

"Then I'll make sure to tell him to go direct to Hyoushin-sama and report." Aoiketsu said grimly. "In Hokkan. Away from here and away from me. You said I'm not the traitor, Myoume, but I'm already betraying people who trust me and I'm now tied to Kounan in a way I don't even understand. Nothing is happening to my best friend and dammit, nothing is happening to him at my hand... I won't risk that. As soon as we've spoken, I'm cutting all ties with Kutou, with the Commander and with everyone else. If they can't find me, I can't be any kind of catalyst for trouble. And I won't risk making matters worse."

"You'll do all that, but you won't run out on us?" Shishi sent him an odd look, and Aoiketsu shook his head.

"I told you. I'm tied." He said quietly. "I don't understand it, but Myoume's right. This is where I'm meant to be. I never killed anyone before, for any reason... but with that guy... rather than let him hurt Hikari... and it was the same in Choukou. Those slave traders I would have killed, if they had hurt her. I've never felt so driven to protect any one person before, and it's a little frightening. But I can't avoid the fact it's there."

He cast Hikari a sidelong glance.

"I'm not so much of an idiot to give myself away so blatantly without there being some reason." He added.

"Natural honesty is reason enough." Myoume murmured. "You've relaxed since you stopped trying to act the part of the Kaiga's lost son, you know. Your aura is far less prickly and far less tense... its something of a relief for me, if you want the truth. At least now I can see you as you really are, which puts my mind at rest."

She grinned.

"I'm confident now that so long as you're here, no harm can come to Hikari." She added. "But that's not to say the job will always be pleasant, Aoi — so I hope your training will stand up to the

challenge.”

“Hey, I’m not so much trouble as that!” Hikari objected hotly. “Myoume, that’s mean!”

“And we’re wasting time.” As they reached the big estate belonging to the head of the village, Shishi reined in her beast, dismounting with a thump. “So I’ll go see if the master is at home, shall I? While you all decide whose fate is what and how much hassle it’s going to be. All right?”

Before anyone could respond, she had hurried up to the door of the house, and, with a rueful exchange of glances, her companions followed her example. By the time they reached the door, the house’s owner stood in the entranceway, his bulky frame blocking the light from the hallway beyond. At the sight of them he let out an exclamation, reaching out meaty hands to take Shishi by the shoulders.

“Well, if it isn’t Tasuki’s cub a second time.” He said lightly, amusement in his clever dark eyes. “Did you like Yukigase so much that you decided to come back? Or is this another Celestial favour, that you’ve come here seeking?”

“A favour, Tamatama-san, I’m afraid.” Hikari stepped forward, seeing that Shishi was too busy trying to disentangle herself without offending their enigmatic companion. “We’re passing through to Hokkan, but... it’s too late to begin the mountain path tonight. And also... we hoped you might know something... something about Nuriko-san and a cave to the north of here.”

“Nuriko?” Tamatama’s eyes widened. Then he smiled, nodding his head.

“For Kourin’s sake, there’s not much I would refuse Suzaku’s people.” He said softly. “Come on in, all of you. You’ve done the right thing — my house is always open when it comes to the children of Nuriko’s friends. Will you introduce me to your companions, Hikari-chan? They’re both strangers to me, unless I’m losing my wits. And Tasuki and Chichiri? They’re not with you this time out?”

“They had to stay in the South-west, because of trouble.” Shishi gathered her composure, shooting the oddly-dressed village elder a wary glance. “So we came alone. Well, at least, Myoume and Aoi came with us. Myoume’s Toroki — Byakko’s representative. And Aoi... Aoi’s just some Eastern soldier we picked up on the way.”

“Hey!” Aoiketsu, who had been staring at Tamatama with a mixture

of confusion and disbelief jerked to himself at this, casting Shishi an annoyed glance. “Thanks for nothing, Shishi!”

“Pleased to meet you, Tamatama-san.” Myoume said smoothly, bowing her head in the older man’s direction. “And thank you for your kind offer. We don’t want to impose, but...”

“It’s never an imposition.” Tamatama shook his head, ushering the group inside as he gestured for them to enter the big open front room, a roaring fire burning in the grate as the tired and chilly travellers shed their cloaks. A maid appeared to take the outer garments, and Tamatama gestured for them to sit down, which they all did, glad that they were no longer in the bitter wind of the mountains.

“Yukigase doesn’t get visitors often.” He continued, as he eased his own considerable bulk into a free chair, arranging his heavy skirts more comfortably across his broad knees as he offered them a warm smile. “And it’s always nice to have visits from Suzaku’s people.”

He cast a glance across the group, then,

“The young man with the sword is also not with you this time?” He asked. “The boy Jin — he also stayed in the South-west?”

Shishi bit her lip, and Hikari sighed, shrugging her shoulders.

“He did.” She said slowly. “He... was killed in Sairou, defending us.”

“Killed?” Tamatama’s eyes widened, then he tut-tutted. “Another sacrifice on Suzaku’s behalf. I’m sorry... I didn’t mean to be insensitive.”

“It’s all right.” Shishi recovered herself, offering him a sad smile. “I’m glad you remembered him — and he would have been, too.”

“Well, he struck me as quite an impressive young man.” Tamatama reflected, sitting back in his seat. “But then any protégée of Tasuki’s would be hard pressed to be otherwise, I imagine. Still, you’ve travelled a long way, if you’ve been in Sairou since the last time we spoke. And now you’re heading back to Hokkan — tell me, what exactly do you want to know about Nuriko and the mountain path?”

“There’s a story about Nuriko fighting a demon in the caves just above Yukigase.” Myoume said evenly. “Do you know the truth behind it?”

“Ah. You mean Yuki-yasha’s legend.” Tamatama’s dark eyes flickered with comprehension and he nodded. “Yes, I can tell you all you want to know about that. I was here at the time, you see — my

father was still the head of the village and Nuriko... well, it was as Kourin she came, to be truthful... she'd come to stay with an uncle who was living in the vicinity. Sonjun, I believe the man's name was — though he left Yukigase and didn't come back, so I can't tell you what became of him. See, this village has long had a legend about a demon that comes when the snow falls. Yuki-yasha, that's what they called her. And even though a lot of us thought maybe it was just a story — there was still that sense of fear about it nonetheless."

He smiled, looking rueful.

"Kourin's coming to Yukigase seemed almost divinely timed." He added. "Because there had been some strange incidents in the area, and the oldest members of the village were convinced that the demon had returned. So it proved to be, in fact... and Kourin took her on, face to face in the caves overlooking the village."

He frowned.

"A young girl from the village was also killed — a girl Kourin was fond of." He added regretfully. "So she didn't really discuss the event with me in great detail. But then, she didn't have to. I know she fought the demon with all of Nuriko's stellar strength, and in the end, she triumphed. The demon was defeated, and Yukigase was saved."

"You call Nuriko a she." Hikari noted. "But she was a he... wasn't he? Even though... I mean..."

She pinkened, trailing off as she seemed to remember who she was speaking to, and Tamatama let out a hearty laugh.

"Oh, my child, don't worry about causing me offence." He said evenly. "Not after all these years — my skin is thick enough to take a lot of criticism, and I don't mind awkward questions. Yes, Nuriko was a boy — by Suzaku's grace, that's how he was born. But to me he was always *she* — always Kourin. If you had known her, you would have realised that Nuriko's spirit was female to the core. She was truly a woman in the form of a man... there's no other way to describe it. And unlike me, whose soul and body disagree... to look at her you would never have known she was not born a woman."

He glanced at himself ruefully.

"I'm not blessed with the figure she was." He said unnecessarily. "But I think people are more defined by their souls than their physical forms. So yes. To me Nuriko — Kourin — was a girl."

"It's a shame you can't meet him then, Aoi." Shishi murmured, casting the soldier a wicked look. "After all, he might have given you

hair tips.”

“*Stop it.*” Aoiketsu bristled. “For the last time, Shishi, I. Am. Not. A. Girl. You’d think, living on the mountain with all those bandits that you’d be able to tell the difference.”

Tamatama laughed appreciatively, shaking his head in amusement.

“Oh, there’s no doubt about that.” He said frankly, offering the young soldier a warm grin. “You might have pretty looks, my friend, but there’s nothing feminine in your bearing. The cub is giving you a hard time, that’s all. You needn’t be so worried — however much people tease you, you’re definitely a man. A very handsome man, perhaps — blessed with a fortunate appearance. But definitely a man.”

“Hah!” Aoiketsu exclaimed, and Shishi snorted.

“You’re such a freak.” She told him derisively. “You’re so easy to wind up it’s untrue.”

“Going back to the topic at hand...” Myoume sent both the soldier and the bandit a meaningful glance, then continued. “Nuriko-san fought this Yukiyaasha and defeated her? Tamatama-san, do you know the whereabouts of that cave?”

“There’s not much left of it. Yukiyaasha brought it down on top of her, in the end.” Tamatama responded. “But yes. I know where it is.”

“There’s a mountain path that goes that way to Hokkan, we think.” Aoiketsu said slowly. “And we need to find that cave, because Shishi has something to collect from there. So if I showed you my map — could you give me some indication as to where it might be?”

“Yes, of course.” Tamatama agreed. “Although I do have a simpler idea. If you can spare an hour or two for me to look, I’m sure I have some old plans that belonged to my father. A couple of hundred years ago, when Kutou were causing so many problems for Hokkan’s people, a lot of refugees escaped through the mountain pass to the south, and my ancestors helped them when they arrived in Yukigase. It’s an old smuggler’s route, I think, but it became rather more a doorway to freedom. Of course, this is a long time ago... but even so, I doubt those pathways will have changed much. Some of our current village residents escaped through Hokkan and down into Kounan that way from Kutou, after the collapse of the previous regime — so I imagine there must still be a route.”

“Kutou.” Aoiketsu murmured, a flicker of dismay in his blue eyes, and Hikari shot him a glance.

“I guess this isn’t a story you’ve heard before, huh?” She said softly. Aoiketsu shrugged.

“I know that Kutou invaded the North Country two hundred years or so ago.” He said slowly. “But... I didn’t realise it was... that kind of an invasion. I mean, that people would flee...”

He faltered, and Tamatama eyed him keenly.

“Ah yes. Shishi said you were from the East.” He said gently. “I’m sorry. I have no political agendas myself, but it’s easy to forget that there are multiple sides to most stories.”

“Yes.” Aoiketsu rubbed his temples. “But the ones I hear from Kounan’s side are a lot more brutal than the ones I was taught growing up in Kutou.”

“That’s the nature of national pride, my boy.” Tamatama said wisely. “Your name is Aoi — correct?”

“Aoiketsu, actually. But Aoi is fine — yes.” Aoiketsu agreed.

“An unusual name.” Tamatama reflected. Aoiketsu grimaced.

“It wasn’t by chance.” He said darkly. “My mother thought it was appropriate.”

“Ah well. There’s no accounting for mothers.” Tamatama said easily. “But I’m intrigued now. A soldier of Kutou, did Shishi say? Fighting for Kounan?”

“It’s complicated.” Hikari frowned. “I... don’t know if we can explain, or even if we should. It might put you in a difficult situation, Tamatama-san. And we don’t want to cause you any trouble.”

“Then I’ll ask no further questions, for the sake of my village’s peace.” Tamatama’s eyes twinkled. “Despite my curiosity.”

He got to his feet.

“It’s not late in the day, but the mountain path is best not attempted unless you’ve a full day to tackle it.” He said. “From your own words, I think you’ve realised that. You’re more than welcome to stay here the night — and I’m more than happy to have you here. I’ll go and look through my father’s papers for that chart. Are you hungry or thirsty? I’ll ask the maid to make tea, or is it not too early for a midday meal?”

“Honestly... I think we could all use a good meal.” Myoume admitted. “It’s been a cold ride, and we’ve had a funny few days with one thing or another.”

She smiled.

“You’re as kind as Hikari and Shishi said you were.” She added. “Thank you.”

“Ah, it’s always my pleasure.” Tamatama’s dark eyes twinkled mischievously. “Yukigase is a quiet village and I’m always glad to have company. Please, make yourselves comfortable. I’ll arrange for someone to bring drinks for you — and then I’m sure that something can be done about feeding you. Food is a highly valued commodity in a cold northern village, you know!”

With which parting remark he was gone, leaving the four travellers exchanging looks.

“He’s...” It was Aoiketsu who broke the silence, but then he faltered. “I’ve never met a person like that before. I almost think we shouldn’t say he.”

“It’s hard to know for sure.” Shishi acknowledged. “But he’s a nice guy... or girl... or whatever. I guess it doesn’t matter too much, really.”

“And if he has a chart, we’ll make quick progress tomorrow.” Myoume sighed. “We’ll find the relic, I hope... at least, Shishi’s the one with the key to that particular lock, so I suppose it’ll be her doing the finding. And then we’ll cross into Hokkan. Do you think we’ll make it to a town by nightfall, Aoi?”

“Depends how long we spend in the caves.” Aoiketsu shrugged. “And I want to see Tamatama-san’s plans first. That’ll make it totally clear.”

He sighed, running his fingers through his thick dark hair as he loosened the white ties, the dark waves falling free around his shoulders in his agitation.

“I need to see Maichu, too.” He murmured. “What... am I going to say to him? I’ll have to tell him something. But since we don’t know who’ll hear his information, I can’t warn him about Myoume’s prediction or any of that. Or can I? Is it more dangerous for him to know... or is it not? What *can* I say? He knows me better than anyone, probably. He’ll be suspicious otherwise.”

“Well, you can’t tell him about Hiki.” Shishi said frankly. “Because if you do, I’ll gut you. So that’s out.”

“Your negotiation skills are so primeval.” Aoiketsu pulled a face at her. “I wasn’t *going* to tell him about Hikari.”

“You can tell him that we’ve plans to cross the mountains tomorrow.” Myoume said slowly. “Not the route, naturally... because with any luck we’ll be beyond the usual mountain path. You can tell him...”

She frowned, pursing her lips.

“I think Maichu is trustworthy.” She said softly. “He’s rather like Jin in that respect... he’s a different character, but when I saw him in Sairou that was my impression of him. He’s simply put together — and it makes him both honest and loyal. That being so...”

She tilted her head on one side.

“It wouldn’t hurt to tell him that we’d met one of Genbu’s people.” She said at length. “But tell him that the man was killed in a skirmish. You can tell him all about that, if you like. It’s true, after all.”

“But *don’t* mention Doryoku.” Shishi warned. “I promised Bachisusan to take care of that and I don’t want Kutou’s people digging around in the caves looking for it.”

“I’m glad you don’t think Maichu’s a demon, Myoume.” Aoiketsu sighed. “Considering what you think of my Commanding Officer.”

“I don’t know what I think of Hyoushin.” Myoume admitted. “Only that I’m sure we haven’t seen the last of him yet.”

“Well, I’ll go into the village and see if I can find Maichu’s sign somewhere near the inn you mentioned.” Aoiketsu said heavily. “Better now, then I can get him across the border before anything can happen to him while he’s in Kounan. I think... that I *am* going to tell him that, Myoume... that you said that he’s in danger in Kounan. Whether it’s compromising information or not, I don’t know... but I want him to be warned. He’s a damn good fighter, and I want him on his mettle.”

“All right.” Myoume agreed. “I did promise that you could, I suppose, even though I’ve told you very little.”

“Then I’ll go now.” Aoiketsu got to his feet. “If Tamatama-san misses me, tell him I’m running an errand for you... I’d rather he didn’t know the true reason for my coming to Kounan. I don’t think he’d like to entertain a spy — even a defected one like me.”

“Defected or defective?” Shishi asked innocently, and Aoiketsu glared at her.

“After a while it stops being funny.” He warned. “If you don’t want me to prove how much better Imperial fighting skill is to bandit

mountain skill, let a few of those go, all right?"

Shishi laughed.

"I definitely like this you better than the floppy, simpering idiot who crashed the Eastern Village." She said contemplatively. "Come back in one piece, Aoi, and don't be too long. We want to eat and we'll start without you if we have to — you've been warned!"

As Aoiketsu headed out into the cool, crisp breeze, he cast a glance around him at the quiet, peaceful border village, taking in its mixture of Hokkan and Kounan styles as he made his way slowly along the high street towards the settlement's one operating inn.

"Truly this place does look more as if it belongs in Hokkan." He decided. "I suppose that it's what Tamatama-san said — that settlers came here when Kutou invaded the north two hundred years ago. What atrocities happened then, I wonder? Stuff we're not taught about, no doubt. I never understood why Kutou was so roundly hated by people outside... but perhaps I'm beginning to see. If Kutou began that war, instead of reacting as we were taught to a plea for help from Hokkan's Prince..."

He sighed, rubbing his temples.

"Maybe there's more of a reason than I thought for all the animosity." He reflected sadly. "Have my nation simply spent their history plundering other countries for what they can gain?"

So deep in thought was he that he did not realise that he had reached his destination, and would have walked past it if not for a rough arm reaching out from the shadows, grabbing him and hauling him down the side passage that led to the building's stables. His fingers were at his waist groping for his sword-hilt before he realised that he was unarmed, and he cursed, raising his gaze to meet the impatient dark eyes of his companion. As he did so, however, relief flooded his heart and he sighed, sinking back against the wall.

"Shit, Maichu, don't scare me like that." He reproached. "If I'd had my sword, I'd have had your head off before I realised who you were!"

"But you ain't armed." Maichu shook his head. "So don't be stupid. Besides, you were walkin' along in a daze. What's going on? This is Yukigase's only inn — right? I expected you to come here — why did you and your girls go right past it? Weren't you goin' to come see me at all?"

“Don’t be stupid.” Aoiketsu sighed. “I said Yukigase. This is Yukigase. I came looking for you — keep your voice down unless you want us to be heard. This is Kounan, remember? Turns out Hikari and Shishi have a friend of the family living in this village. We’re staying at his house... that’s all.”

“Oh.” Maichu frowned. “Well, it would’ve been nice to have had warning... I about had kittens when I saw you ride past.”

“Sorry.” Aoiketsu looked rueful, scratching his head. “I didn’t know myself until we were practically here.”

“Well, I suppose it doesn’t matter now.” Maichu sighed. “And this isn’t a good place to talk, but I know somewhere that is. I’ve been here a day and I’ve realised that most everyone knows everyone else in this village. So any odd faces or strange behaviour doesn’t go unnoticed. I told them I was a trader on the way to join business associates in Touran and they accepted that — but I don’t think we should have a discussion in the bar where anyone might hear us. I don’t want to get either of us into any shit, after all.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Aoiketsu eyed his friend in surprise. “Three days ago you were relaxed about this — what’s changed?”

“I had word from Kutou, is all.” Maichu hesitated, then, “Shit, I guess there ain’t an easy way to break it. There was a riot in the southern province — a rebel uprising an’ it seemed to gain some ground. A lot of people were killed, Aoi. Koku Maru was one of them.”

“Maru?” Aoiketsu’s eyes opened wide with horror, and Maichu nodded.

“Him and most of his regiment.” He agreed grimly. “The Emperor sent reinforcements and they suppressed the revolt. But it was a heavy loss. And Maru was among those killed.”

“Shit.” Aoiketsu swallowed hard. “So what does that mean... for us?”

“Only that our mission’s got a lot more important.” Maichu said grimly. “I’m to join Hyoushin-sama in Touran. Tonight, if I can make the journey.”

“You’ll never get through the mountains overnight.” Aoiketsu objected. “I’ve looked at the maps and it’s not possible. If it was, we’d be leaving Yukigase this evening ourselves... Maichu, even if you do want to get back to the Commander quickly, it’ll be suicidal.”

“Well, perhaps.” Maichu grimaced. “Oh, I don’t like missions on my

own, Aoi. I don't like having to make snap decisions about things like that when I find out an old buddy's been killed. I guess I'll be glad to get back to some sense of normality, is all. It's all got a little sinister, now that I know this all happened not far from the Kounan/Kutou border. It makes me wonder... if people on this side of the divide are involved."

Aoiketsu was silent for a moment, digesting this. Then he shook his head.

"Where can we talk?" He asked softly. "Here is almost as open as the bar would be... you've been here longer than I have, so you must have some idea."

"Yeah. Follow me." Maichu agreed. "Round the back of the stables is an outhouse. The lock's broken so that it jams — but I can undo it. And the building is unused — a storm brought a branch through the roof so it's no longer secure. But it will suit our purpose."

"Fine. I'm right behind you." Aoiketsu nodded, trailing his companion down the narrow passageway to the area where three or four wooden stalls had been crudely fashioned for stabling horses. Beyond that was the small outhouse Maichu had mentioned, and the other soldier slipped his blade through the lock, loosening it enough to pull it open. A musty smell wafted out, and Maichu cast his friend a rueful look.

"Sorry. You're going to go back to your girlfriends smelling a little ripe." He said apologetically. "But it can't be helped."

"You always do fight the creepiest places to get in and out of, that's for sure." Aoiketsu followed him inside, grimacing at the smell. "Maichu, you're as much of a spider as ever, you know that?"

"Well, guess it fits." Maichu said ruefully. "Sit down, huh? We should be fine to talk here."

"Right." Aoiketsu did as he was bidden, pushing aside a couple of dusty, rusted implements as he made himself as comfortable as was possible on the cold stone floor. "Though I'm not really sure where to begin."

"How about Suzaku's Shinzahou? That would be helpful." Maichu said succinctly. Aoiketsu bit his lip. Then he shook his head.

"I can't tell you about that." He said honestly. Maichu frowned.

"I thought that was the point of you gaining their trust." He said, confused. "Wasn't it? How can you have spent this long with them and

not found out? Aoi-kun...”

“It’s more complicated than you think.” Aoiketsu said softly. “Trust me, all right? I have things to tell you, but not about Suzaku’s Shinzahou. But they’re important things anyway. Things you need to take note of.”

“Well, okay, though Seiryuu only knows what I’m telling the Commander.” Maichu sighed resignedly. “Go on. What stuff?”

“Last night we passed through a small town.” Aoiketsu said slowly. “There was a circus in session there.”

“So you went to the circus last night?” Maichu blinked, and despite himself, Aoiketsu smiled.

“Yes and no.” He admitted. “Turns out one of the circus performers was one of Genbu’s people. Urumiya.”

“Uru...” Maichu’s eyes widened. “Shit. So Suzaku’s lot have found Genbu’s Seishi already?”

“Not really.” Aoiketsu shook his head. “The guy was killed in a skirmish.”

“So what use is that information, then — if he’s dead?” Maichu frowned. “Did he say anything, before he died?”

“He was Meihi.” Aoiketsu said softly, crossing and uncrossing his fingers behind his back as he tried to ignore the feelings of guilt welling up inside of him. “He didn’t speak Chinese. I only know he was Genbu’s Urumiya because of the mark on his brow... that’s what Myoume said he was.”

“A Meihi? Like the Commander?” Maichu’s brows knitted together. “Shit. If only we’d found him first. Even though he never does use it, I bet the Commander still remembers how to speak Meihi. He might’ve got information out of him.”

He sighed.

“Okay. I can tell him that, anyway. It might mean something to him.” He reflected. “What else? What about the Hikari girl — anything else on that score?”

“No.” Aoiketsu shook his head, and Maichu frowned.

“Aoi...” He said slowly, and Aoiketsu gazed at him, a quizzical look in his blue eyes.

“Yes?”

“Something’s up with you.” Maichu murmured. “I don’t know what it is, but I do know you ain’t your usual self. It’s not just me — it’s not just my paranoia. Something’s bothering you — you’re keeping something back.”

Aoiketsu sighed, glancing at the ground.

“Somewhat.” He acknowledged. “Maichu, when you saw Toroki in Sairou, she made a prediction, didn’t she? To you and Kayu and the Commander when you went and took the Shinzahou from her.”

“Who told you that?” Maichu looked startled.

“Kayu, originally.” Aoiketsu responded. “But I’d like to hear it from you, too. Because... things that woman’s said...”

Maichu frowned.

“Hyoushin-sama asked us not to speak about it, else I’d have told you.” He murmured. “Kayu shouldn’t have said anything... but since he has, I’ll tell you. It wasn’t a clear prediction — just that something was going to happen among us, or something like that. One will be killed by a brother or a friend... and the Emperor will be betrayed...”

“By one of tribal birth.” Aoiketsu whispered. Maichu nodded.

“That was it.” He agreed. “But the woman’s working for the South... I didn’t really bother about it. Why?”

“Toroki’s predictions come true, Maichu.” Aoiketsu said grimly. “Trust me. They do. She predicted that Miramu would kill that bandit before it happened... and it’s not the only thing she’s predicted. Whatever she said — you should take it seriously. Really.”

Maichu stared at him.

“You’re sounding like Kayu.” He murmured. “Do you think the Commander’s going to betray the Emperor, Aoi?”

“No.” Aoiketsu said softly. “I don’t. But listen to me. Maichu — I *am* Nakago’s son. There’s no doubt. If I hadn’t have been, I wouldn’t have been able to break Suiko’s seal. So Hyoushin-sama isn’t the only tribesman associated with the Emperor. Through my father’s blood, I’m one too.”

Maichu’s eyes narrowed as he understood the hidden implication in his friend’s words.

“Shit, Aoi.” He murmured. “What have you done?”

“Nothing.” Aoiketsu held up his hands, shaking his head. “I’ve done

nothing. It's not that at all. I just... wanted you to know."

"Okay. You wanted me to know." Maichu frowned. "Look, Aoi. We're buddies. Ain't we? I mean, we've always been that — right?"

"Yes." Aoiketsu agreed.

"And you'd tell me, wouldn't you, if you were in some kind of trouble?"

"It isn't me that might be." Aoiketsu bit his lip, then, "Maichu, Toroki's said things. Things about you and Kayu and the vision in the cave. Kayu wanted me to find out what she meant by her prophesy, but it's *your* name she was saying... that something was going to happen. And... it worried me. She said so long as you were in Kounan... something might... befall you."

Maichu's eyes glittered with alarm.

"Why would she say that to you?" He demanded. "Aoi, why would she bother... does she know who you are?"

"Even *I* don't know that any more." Aoiketsu glanced at his hands. Maichu frowned, grabbing him by the shoulders and giving him a shake.

"Tell me." He said frankly. "Tell me everything, dammit. I need to know."

Aoiketsu faltered, and Maichu gave him another shake.

"Aoi. Tell me. Now." He said urgently. "If we're really friends, dammit... tell me what you know."

Aoiketsu sighed. Then he shrugged.

"Leave Kounan." He said quietly. "I don't know why or by what means, but if you stay you may be in danger. And don't assume Toroki's predictions have no basis, Maichu. Believe me they do."

He closed his eyes briefly, then,

"I'm sorry." He added. "There are a lot of things I want to say but can't. If I did, it might get to the wrong person, and if that happened, you'd be in trouble for sure. It's *because* you're my friend that I can't tell you everything... but it's more complicated than any of us thought it was. All of it. Kutou's involvement, Kounan's involvement... everything is. All I know is that for Kutou's sake — for the Emperor's sake — we have to prevent it from happening. And right now I... I don't know exactly how to do that. But I... I have one idea. And... and I have to go with that idea. Even if it kills me, Maichu — it's the only

hope I have.”

Maichu stared at him, confusion in his dark eyes.

“You’re speaking in tongues.” He muttered. “What kind of idea?”

“Better you don’t know.” Aoiketsu shook his head. “Then only one of us can be branded traitor.”

“But if it’s for the Emperor’s sake...”

“It is. It always is.” Aoiketsu nodded. “For him, for Kutou, just as we’ve been trained to do. For the Commander’s sake, too. For everything I’ve grown up knowing. But nothing is as simple as it seems. And I don’t know... what might happen, yet. Even though it’s for Kintsusei-sama that I’m thinking along these lines... Maichu, it might not seem that way in front of the throne. So I won’t get you involved. Just do as I say, okay? I mean it. Go to Hokkan, see Hyoushin-sama and tell him...”

He faltered, and Maichu sighed.

“Tell him what, exactly?” He demanded. “You haven’t damn well told me anything!”

“Tell him that.” Aoiketsu said evenly. “Tell him that we found Genbu’s representative but that he was killed in a fight in the city. But most of all... tell him that the Emperor is in danger, Maichu. Tell him that.”

“You really believe it, don’t you?” Maichu bit his lip, and Aoiketsu nodded.

“In danger from whom? Kounan?”

“No.” Aoiketsu shook his head. “Someone or something else.”

“Of tribal birth, like Toroki predicted?”

“Yes.”

“But who, dammit? You’re sounding crazy right now, but I don’t believe you have it in you to betray your Emperor, Aoi. And Hyoushin-sama’d sooner give up breathing than even think the word treason. Who else has tribal blood? How can I do anything about this if you don’t give me the details?”

“You can’t.” Aoiketsu admitted. “You’ll have to leave it to me and trust me. You can do that, right? Trust me.”

“Aoi...”

“Please, Maichu.” Aoiketsu grabbed his friend’s arm, meeting his gaze urgently. “I’ve already told you more than I was meant to. But when you told me about Maru — I knew I had to tell you something. People are dying and it frightens me. Something’s going bad in Kutou, and I don’t know what... something darker than what any of us realised was there.”

“If we don’t know our enemy, then this information is pretty useless.” Maichu sighed, but a flicker of relief stirred in Aoiketsu’s heart as he realised his friend believed him. “And Toroki said I’d be killed?”

“No.” Aoiketsu shook his head. “But that you... something would happen. It didn’t sound... very good, the way she said it.”

“If I stay in Kounan?”

“If you stay in Kounan.”

“Then I’ll do as you say and go to Hokkan at first light.” Maichu decided. “I’ll think over everything you’ve said and work out what I can tell the Commander without panicking him. That is, so long as we are both convinced he’s not the traitor... right?”

“Right.” Aoiketsu nodded. “I don’t know who it is, but I’m certain — one hundred percent certain — that Hyoushin-sama is who it isn’t.”

“Me too.” Maichu agreed. “But I was thinking about Kayu and the others. Kayu’s not been quite so certain, since we saw Toroki in that cave. And...”

“None of them must know, then, anything I’ve said.” Aoiketsu said firmly. “None of them. And only tell the Commander what you think he ought to know.”

Maichu paused for a moment. Then,

“Suzaku knows who you are, doesn’t he?” He asked softly. Aoiketsu started, then met Maichu’s gaze with a sad one of his own.

“I told you. Even *I* don’t know who I am right at the moment.” He admitted. “But if I am the Shougun’s son, then this is to do with me. Suiko said I had Seiryuu’s blood... as if I’m Seiryuu’s representative in my father’s absence. So no matter what anyone thinks or says, Maichu, my loyalties are with Kutou. With Kintsusei-sama. And they always will be. All right? Even if things go wrong... that’s the truth of it.”

“I know you better than to doubt that.” Maichu said firmly, clapping his hand down on Aoiketsu’s shoulder. “Right. Well, you’ve

told me everything and nothing in this short, sweet exchange. I'll have to think it all over, and obviously I'm not going to get straight answers from you if I ask direct questions. So I won't bother. But I will have faith in you. If you've uncovered something and you think that you can help the Emperor by pursuing it, I trust you. Just don't let me down, huh? And don't get yourself killed in the process. I don't think the Commander'd be too amused, if you were skewered on a spike outside the Kounan royal palace."

"Don't." Aoiketsu shivered, and Maichu laughed.

"You're still as squeamish as ever." He reflected. Aoiketsu nodded.

"Sadly, yes." He agreed. He hesitated, then,

"Maichu, if all goes well, I'll see you in Kutou when things are over." He said gravely. "But if they don't, I won't come back. You may not know... why or how things happened. But you shouldn't come looking for me. If I can, I'll come home. If not... it means I probably didn't make it that far."

"Shit, you're so melodramatic." Maichu sighed. "All right. I get it. Cloak and dagger but I'll do as you say. Whatever it is you've stumbled onto... I sure hope it's worth all the emphasis you're putting on it."

"I think it's the only hope Kutou has." Aoiketsu bit his lip. "I have to go. I told Shishi and the others I was only going for a brief walk and they'll be waiting for me. I can't be found talking to you here like this."

"I'd rather not be arrested before I leave Kounan." Maichu agreed. "All right. Take care. And listen... don't get killed, all right? I understand your reasons for not telling me everything — at least, I think I do, and I'm touched you're worried about me. But we're buddies an' you don't have to fight all your battles alone, you know. If you need me, you know where I am. Send a message to the spider, Aoi — I'll find a way to scuttle to your aid."

Aoiketsu stared at his companion for a moment. Then he grinned, hugging him tightly and taking him off guard.

"Woah! Let me go — stop it!" Maichu exclaimed, and Aoiketsu laughed.

"I'm glad it's that way." Was all he said, however. "Have a safe journey North, Maichu. And if all goes well... I'll see you in Kutou when everything is how it should be."

Chapter 16

Chapter Fifteen

The mountain path was clearer today.

As Hyoushin made his way grimly up the cold frozen slopes of Koku-zan, he ruminated on the quickness with which mountain weather could change. Where yesterday had been a whirling dervish of flakes, today was open, glittering terrain, bright with fresh snow but clear and crisp for walking.

“And today I must speak to my Meihi brethren about Genbu’s Shinzahou.” He mused as he carefully negotiated a hidden ledge of rock covered by the soft white snow. “My men become restless and I cannot delay any longer. Maichu will soon rejoin our party — he must have made contact with Aoiketsu a second time by now, and I am eager to hear his report. That being the case, I must eliminate all options before we cross further into Hokkan’s land.”

He reached the end of the pathway, seeing for the first time the thin trails of smoke that marked the area he was about to enter as settled land. The roofs of the traditional, familiar Meihi houses became gradually visible as he moved closer, and before long he reached the glittering, patterned line of stones which marked the edge of the settlement from the world outside. He paused for a moment, bending to brush snow off one of the stones as he recognised the character carved into it. A rueful smile touched his lips as he ran his index finger over the groove that made up the Meihi sign for “peace”.

“*Ihi*.” He murmured. “The irony of that is overwhelming. I have come to this village — the village of the Tribe of Peace... with nothing but uncertainty and doubt in my heart. I would not be surprised if such a place should reject me — or if I even really know any more what those values mean.”

“I wondered how long it would be before you returned, Hyoushin.”

At that moment a voice jerked him out of his thoughts and he glanced up, withdrawing his hand hurriedly from the stone and getting to his feet as he registered the presence of the settlement’s middle aged elder. For a moment the older man just stood there watching him. Then, with a smile touching his lips, the elder held up his hands in greeting.

Hyoushin eyed the man warily for a moment, berating himself inwardly for having been caught so off guard. Slowly, he inclined his head in acknowledgement, making no attempt to echo the Meihi greeting with his own fingers. Somehow this seemed to amuse the older man more, for his smile widened, and he shrugged his shoulders.

“There are many ways to say hello.” He reflected softly. “I won’t take offence because you choose to ignore the tradition of your people.”

“You expected my arrival?” Hyoushin asked softly, speaking in quiet, Kutou-tinged Meihi and the older man frowned, shaking his head.

“Do not perjure your native tongue with an Eastern slur, my friend.” He said chidingly. “Even if it’s the Emperor you represent — at least have respect enough for your heritage to speak pure, clean Meihi when in my presence. I know you’re capable — the last time we spoke, you had no such intonation.”

Hyoushin’s eyes narrowed, then he spread his hands, resignation flickering in his violet eyes.

“As you command.” He agreed, the Eastern accent dissipating from his words in an instant. “My apologies. I do not mean to offend you. I suppose I am so used to speaking Kutou’s dialect that sometimes I become... confused.”

“Or you find it easier to handle your past if you add a protective layer of Kutou’s culture to it.” The older man said shrewdly. “A haze through which you can pretend you are an outside observer — that it is not your life but the life of another. Am I correct?”

Hyoushin’s eyes widened, and for a moment he stood there, his composure unsettled as he found himself helpless to respond. The older man gestured to the stones.

“You come here at the Emperor of Kutou’s behest, yet you still recognise the meaning written on those stones?” He asked quietly. Hyoushin hesitated. Then he nodded.

“*Me. Tribe. Hae. Faith. Rayi. Hope. Jaei. Prosperity. Kija. Life. Kali. Fidelity.*” He said slowly, no emotion in his words at all. The elder eyed him for a moment, then,

“And the last one?” He murmured. “The one that you were studying with such a particular eye?”

Hyoushin frowned.

"Ihi." He said reluctantly. "Peace."

"Indeed." The elder nodded. "The seven characters that make up the spell that protects this place from harm. Or do you not believe in those things any more, now you are a military officer in Kutou's Imperial Guard?"

"I have seen with my own eyes that such spells are useless against men with swords." Hyoushin said flatly. "Your tradition is quaint — but futile. It does no more than mark your land — you should not rely on it to defend you from harm."

"But we are the Meihi, aren't we?" The elder reproached. "We don't fight. We are the Tribe of Peace... if we don't have faith in our peaceful methods, what use is it us having such a name?"

Despite himself Hyoushin faltered, and at his expression the older man chuckled, holding out his hand in a gesture of friendship.

"I am harsh on you. I'm sorry." He reflected. "Please, come with me. The least I can do for so teasing you is to offer you a warm drink and an opportunity to tell me your story. You have come for a specific reason, I think — ever since your last visit, I've wondered if and when we'd meet again, Hyoushin."

"Will you explain why that is, Father?" Hyoushin found his voice, sending his companion a questioning glance. "I certainly had no immediate plans to return here, the last time I was on Koku-zan. If I did not anticipate such a trip — how could you, even from that time?"

"Because of the nature of your visit." The old man said softly. "You searched for Seiryuu's Eastern treasure — tell me, my friend, did you succeed in your quest?"

"Yes, Father. I did. In a manner of speaking." Hyoushin was surprised. "But then you told me that you and your companions knew nothing about Seiryuu."

"And so we do not." The man agreed. "But if you sought Seiryuu's treasure, perhaps you would seek others. And in the North country, with us as depleted a race as we are — it seems natural that you would come to us for information. We are, after all, natives to this land now. And no matter how much you flee your heritage, your instincts still remain the same as ours. Birds of a feather flock together."

"Perhaps so." Hyoushin acknowledged, as the other man led them towards one of the small stone structures, pausing as his companion swept open the door, ushering him inside.

“You are travelling alone this time?”

“No.” Hyoushin admitted. “My companions are also here in the snowlands. I have dispatched them on similar reconnaissance missions. I thought that you would prefer it if I came here alone to speak to you — it seemed a more tactful thing to do.”

“For your sake, Hyoushin, or for ours?”

“Both, I imagine.” Hyoushin admitted ruefully, and the old man smiled.

“My name is Bakaru.” He said evenly. “Although if you want to call me Father, I won’t object to that. You still are far more Meihi in your nature than you try to appear, you know — your reversion to Meihi social convention just on stepping over my village boundaries is proof of that fact.”

“Well, I am Meihi.” Hyoushin said quietly. “Nothing will ever change the colour of my eyes, my hair or my skin. I am as you are — born a tribesman, made a slave, changed as a free man. The difference between us is simply this — I have stayed in the East, where I was born. You’ve come North.”

“I was born in Hokkan, so it doesn’t seem like a strange choice to make for me.” Bakaru smiled. “My family lived not far from Kutou’s border. But we’re going back a long way, now — a lifetime before this one, as they say. Take a seat, Hyoushin. There’s another reason why I’m glad to see you, and I hope you might spend some time talking to me. After all, your mission here is to learn of Genbu’s secrets this time, isn’t it? And it might be that I’ve heard stories or rumours to that effect. But I’d like to speak to you of other things, first. The last time you were here, we didn’t get such a chance. And it’s rare to see a Meihi who isn’t a member of our settlement. It’s always nice to have a visitor.”

“I suppose that’s a fair exchange, if you do indeed know anything about Genbu’s Shinzahou.” Hyoushin admitted cautiously. “Very well. But be aware, Father — I am not given to discussing my past with anyone. Especially not strangers.”

“Not even fellow Meihi?” Bakaru tut-tutted. “Well, if that’s how you feel. I’ll fetch food and drink and we’ll have a nice, even chat about Kutou instead, shall we? About your mission here, maybe... or anything you like. I want to get your measure — that’s all.”

He smiled.

“Like you, I learnt the Eastern tongue when I was in Kutou, and for

a time, I used it.” He added. “I believe we’re more similar than you think, maybe. Only I am older than you — and age brings wisdom, so they say.”

“So they say.” Hyoushin echoed. “Yes. Wisdom, perhaps.”

“Not closure, however?” Bakaru asked, and Hyoushin eyed him impassively. Slowly he shook his head.

“There is no closure for the slaughter of ones you loved.” He said flatly. “On that subject, Bakaru, I will not speak.”

Bakaru eyed him for a moment. Then he bowed his head in acknowledgement.

“Then I will fetch refreshments.” He said evenly. “If you’ll humour me just one moment, and wait.”

With that he withdrew, and Hyoushin sat back in his seat, staring around the small chamber with a mixture of nostalgia and unease. It was, he reflected, something of a throwback to his own childhood, no matter how hard he tried to hold the memories at bay. The layout was simple and functional, but the windows were framed by delicately woven fabrics in a distinct Meihi style, and everywhere he looked he could see the fine stonework that the Northern Meihi had made themselves known for at Touran’s bustling market.

So lost in his thoughts was he that he did not register the fact he had company right away. Then, as he heard the faint, uneven shuffle of feet, he faltered, turning to face the newcomer with a flicker of wariness in his amethyst eyes. However, it was not the village elder that stood before him, but a young woman of perhaps five or six years younger than his own age, her thick silver hair bound back from her face in a traditional unmarried Meihi style. She was dressed in warm, thick fabrics expertly sewn into the same design as he remembered his mother wearing, with patterns and flowers embroidered into the skirt by a skilled seamstress using the tribe’s unique stitching style. At her throat glittered a blackstone pendant carved from the mountain rock, and though it was engraved with something, with the glint of the wintery sun he could not make out what it was.

The young woman’s face was marked with a similar white scar to his own, and at the sight of it, a flicker of anger flared up inside of him. As she stood there, eying him uncertainly, he also registered the faint clouding of her left eye, and his indignation grew as he realised how ill-treated this newcomer must once have been in her life as a slave.

For a moment there was silence between them. Then the girl stepped forward, a slight limp to her gait, and to his surprise Hyoushin saw tears glittering in her amethyst eyes.

“Nii-chan?” She whispered, and at the sound, Hyoushin’s brows knitted together.

“Pardon me?” He murmured quietly. “Can I help you? I’m a guest of your Elder, Bakaru... I didn’t realise he had company.”

“He... told me...” The woman faltered, pausing not far away from him as she reached up to touch the scar on his cheek, and at her gesture, Hyoushin flinched back, staring at her in disbelief.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m sorry.” The woman shook her head, the tears spilling down her cheeks as she did so. “Please, don’t... don’t be angry with me. It’s been so long, and I had to... I had to see... when the Father told me...”

She hesitated again, eying him with her good eye. Then she drew a heavy breath into her lungs, as if struggling to steady herself.

“It’s like I’m seeing a ghost. An impossible ghost.” She breathed. “But I know... I know it’s you. I know it’s *you*, Nii-chan. Just as I’ve always known. I knew you’d come... one day, you’d come to find me.”

Hyoushin stared at her, knocked off guard by her words, and at his hesitation, the woman bent somewhat stiffly, slipping her hand beneath his as she raised it up to her gaze.

“It is you, isn’t it?” She asked anxiously. “It is you... Lilaihi?”

At the sound of his given name, Hyoushin’s eyes almost fell out of his head and he swallowed hard, his fingers instinctively gripping hers as a wild, impossible idea flared through his normally detached senses.

“Li... rayi?” He whispered, and at his words, the girl’s expression transformed from hesitation to joy as she let out an exclamation, flinging her arms around him as she buried her head in his shoulder.

“Nii-chan!” She sobbed, clinging to him tightly and Hyoushin was so stunned that he found he was helpless to do anything about it. “Oh, I knew it was you. I knew it was! I knew that you’d finally come!”

Hurriedly Hyoushin gathered his wits, disentangling the woman as he held her at arm’s length. He stared at her, hardly daring to believe that he might hold his sister in his grasp, but as he ran his gaze over her more carefully, he saw a flicker of something in the damaged

amethyst gaze, and his heart clenched in his chest as he recognised the curve of the woman's lips, and the cheeky, upturned tip to her nose. He bit his lip, having the distinct sensation that he was seeing his dead mother's ghost shadowed in the young woman's hopeful expression, and for the first time in almost twenty five years he found himself unable to keep a hold of his composure as emotion glittered in his normally passive gaze.

"Lirayi." He whispered, holding the girl to him tightly once more as if afraid she might be ripped away. "How is it even possible? How can you be here... and how could I not know of it?"

"I've waited for so long." Lirayi murmured, slipping her hand once more into his as she gazed up at him. "I had faith in you, even though it seemed impossible at times. It was all I could do... live up to my name and hope you were still alive. After all... you were the only one who might be. The only one about whom I... didn't know. Father's death, Mother's death... from the tree-tops Kali-nii and I saw it all, as you were dragged away. And when we came down from the trees... you weren't there. Father and Mother... both of them, lying dead in their own blood. These we saw, Onii-chan. But you... were gone. And when *they* found us... when they took us... you weren't there, either. So I didn't know, but I hoped. And even more so — after Kaliri... I hoped."

Something pierced through Hyoushin's heart, and he frowned, eying her carefully.

"Kaliri is dead too, then?" He asked softly, and Lirayi nodded tearfully.

"He died because he got in the way of our master and his whip." She whispered. "He took lashes meant for me, and he was already weak. He did his best to look after me, Lilaihi. I wish I could have helped him. But then Bakaru... he's been good to me, too. Thanks to him, I escaped. And I came with him here, because I didn't know where you were or if I could find you. Besides... I was injured."

She gestured to her leg, and Hyoushin frowned, biting his lip.

"Injured how?" He murmured. "I can see... your eye is damaged, isn't it? But you are hurt... in other ways?"

"My leg is weak. I can walk, but not for great distances without aid." Lirayi shrugged her shoulders. "But its all right. I'm alive, and you're here, and so things are better all the time. Besides, one of the women who came here with us when we first settled taught me to weave and stitch like Mother used to, and I've leant to carve and

fashion rock to sell at market. I'm quite good with my hands, even if I'm not as mobile as I could be. And I... I don't look for a husband, Nii-chan. I don't want to let any man ever touch me again, not now. So it's all right. I have enough. Now I've you... I have enough."

"I'm sorry." Hyoushin said gravely, as he understood the implications of her words. "I couldn't protect you, even though I promised that I would. I'm sorry, Rayi. I let you down."

"Don't be stupid." Lirayi shook her head. "You're alive — that's all that matters to me. You were only a boy, then. You couldn't have done anything against men with swords — I know that and I've never blamed you for what happened. Besides, you were a slave too. You've suffered as much as me, I'm sure. You shouldn't apologise for my past — it's just that, now. Past. And now we're together again."

Hyoushin hesitated for a moment. Then, slowly, he shook his head.

"I can't stay in Hokkan, Rayi." He said soberly, and Lirayi started, staring at him in confusion.

"But... why not?"

"Because I have an errand I must complete." Hyoushin said evenly. "For Kutou's Emperor, to whom I owe my freedom."

"Kutou's..." Lirayi's eyes widened. "But... that place... with all we've suffered..."

"It's not so simple." Hyoushin shook his head. "Rayi, we're not slaves now. But Kaliri died without finding freedom and others... this still happens to others each day. The Emperor is not like his father. He is trying to eradicate all of this — but he needs help and I have promised to help him. My word cannot be broken — I'm a Meihi, after all. You know that means I take such promises seriously. While there are still slaves, I don't feel fully free... and so I must complete my task and return East. I must."

"But..." Lirayi eyed him uncertainly. "If you leave here, Nii-chan — when will I see you again? *Will* I? Will you come back, when it's over?"

Hyoushin was silent for a moment. Then he sighed.

"I don't know what the future holds." He admitted. "I don't think of it, or the past, except with that goal in mind. It's kept me strong these past eighteen years and it's something I can cling to, whenever I'm afraid of being engulfed by past memories. Each time you say my name, it shakes those memories free from their hiding places, and it's

difficult... I can't face those things yet. Not until I complete my obligation to Kutou — I can't be Lilaihi, little sister. Time has passed... I'm not so much a Meihi as I once was. I don't think I... I could ever live as one again, not now."

He glanced down at his hands, then up at his sister's tearful visage, reaching out to brush away the water from her lashes.

"I don't want to be separated from you again." He admitted. "But I won't tear you away from a place you're safe and happy. Bakaru must be someone I can trust, if he's cared for you so well as this. But even so, I can't stay here now and probably not even in the future. I... I belong in Kutou. Even despite the past... I... the Emperor is more than just a master to me. He is a friend — the one to whom I owe everything. So I will not betray his faith in me. I must help him succeed. And then... if we succeed..."

He faltered, then,

"I will come back to Hokkan, then, when Kutou is finally free from war and slavery." He said at length. "And I will ask you to come back with me to the East. But if you choose not to come, little sister, I won't blame you or hate you for your decision. To at least know you're safe and alive is enough to strengthen my resolve to fight for Kutou's peace, after all."

Lirayi sighed, then she slowly nodded her head.

"I understand." She said softly. "You always keep your word, Nii-chan, so I know you'll do what the Emperor asks of you. That's why I knew if you could, one day you'd come back to me. Because you never broke a promise. Only death could have kept it from happening — and I didn't want to believe you were dead."

She sighed again.

"So what is your errand?" She asked. "Bakaru said it had something to do with Genbu and the holy treasures of the Beast Gods. Have you then become a convert to Seiryuu's faith?"

"No, far from it." Hyoushin shook his head. "But it is my duty to track down the treasure belonging to the Gods, nonetheless."

"Then you've come to speak to the right people." At that moment Bakaru re-emerged, a smile on his face as he glanced between them, setting the refreshments down on the table. "So it is true. You *are* Lilaihi, after all. When I saw how intently you studied that stone outside... I was sure that it could not be a coincidence that you'd show such interest in the character for peace, yet omit it so plainly

when you recited the list of letters in front of me. I was sure it had another meaning to you than our village's spell... but I knew only Rayi would be able to tell for sure."

He held out his hands.

"You can acknowledge this to me, Hyoushin of Kutou? Lilaihi is your true name?"

Hyoushin eyed him for a moment. Then, slowly, he nodded his head.

"So it is." He agreed gravely, and Bakaru's smile widened.

"I did hope so." He admitted. "And if that's the case, I will tell you what I know about Genbu and his holy treasure."

"You do then have information?"

"Much information." The elder agreed, sitting down as he cast Lirayi a glance. "The slave scar is not the only scar I bear, although the other rarely shows itself these days. My name is Bakaru, Lilaihi — the Elder of this village. But I'm also one half of another identity."

He spread his hands, and as he did so, Hyoushin saw the strange curl of black stretch across the man's brow. His eyes widened, and Bakaru nodded.

"The sign of Urumiya." He agreed. "Or half of it — by Genbu's grace, the soul of Urumiya was split between two brothers once and so it is again. But my brother's whereabouts and condition I know not — we've been so far apart that I don't even know if he still lives, now. Still, weak and disconnected as we are, we still serve a purpose in this world."

"Bakaru's power helped us to escape, when Kaliri died." Lirayi added, and Bakaru nodded.

"It was the first and only time I've ever manifested any Seishi power at all." He agreed. "But it isn't my power in which you are interested, Lilaihi. It's the whereabouts of Genbu no Shinzahou."

He sent Hyoushin a conspiratorial look, life glittering in his amethyst eyes.

"And that's where you're in luck." He added. "Because I am the one who hid it... and — *if* you agree to my conditions — I'll tell you where it is."

“I don’t understand, Kayu-kun.”

Ouno reined in his horse, casting his companion a confused look. “Why are we taking the path to the mountain? Hyoushin-sama said he would tackle it — and the skies are clear today. Why are we following him?”

“Because I’m worried about him.” Kayu said briefly, halting his own steed as he turned to send his companion an impatient glance. “Or are you completely willing to ignore everything that’s happened since we got here? The Commander’s not himself and it’s bothering me. Something’s up, and I think we have a right to know what it is — don’t you?”

“That almost sounds like a jealous lover spying on a cheating spouse.” Kitora’s soft tones purred at Kayu’s other side, and he wheeled around, shooting her a dark look.

“You didn’t have to come with us.” He said bluntly. “This is no business of yours.”

“On the contrary, Kayu-kun.” Kitora tut-tutted, shaking her head so her thick waves of hair fell enticingly across her shoulders. “Your interests are my interests. Don’t you realise that?”

“You’re Byakko’s kitten. You’re not here for us or for Kutou, so shut up.” Kayu said flatly, and Kitora laughed.

“On the contrary.” She murmured. “I’m here for a very specific purpose. I’ve heard the prophesy too, Kayu-kun. The one that has you chasing your sensei up the mountain as if you can’t trust him to be out of your sight for more than a few moments at a time.”

“Prophesy?” Ouno’s eyes widened. “What kind of prophesy, Kayu... what’s she talking about?”

“That’s no business of anyone’s.” Kayu shook his head. “Kitora, shut up. Stop trying to cause trouble, will you? It’s a hard enough ride without that, and I don’t want the Commander to know we’re travelling this way too. I don’t want him to see us.”

“So you’re being naughty boys.” Kitora shook her head reproachfully. “Tut tut. Don’t you trust the man your Emperor entrusted this mission to?”

“Of course we trust the Commander!” Ouno objected, and Kayu sighed.

“I *want* to trust him.” He admitted slowly. “That’s why I’m here. I want... to prove... I can trust him.”

“Kayu?” Ouno stared at his friend as if seeing him for the first time, and Kayu glanced down at his hands.

“Before I left the palace, Kikei-sama charged me with a specific task. And I can’t refuse to do it.” He admitted. “Ouno, you mustn’t tell anyone about this. But... he asked me to keep an eye on the Commander. He thought... something was wrong. And I... I’m starting to think so too. When we were in Sairou, that witch Toroki predicted that someone of tribal blood would betray our Emperor. And... and...”

“You think it’s Hyoushin-sama?” Ouno’s eyes almost fell out of his head.

“I didn’t want to.” Kayu shook his head. “But since we left Kutou, he’s not been himself. You’ve seen it too. The way those children scared him, in Touran — as if they brought him a message... and yesterday, when he was so obtuse about his progress and so unconcerned about ours. Plus, he could easily leave a message for Maichu at the inn and take us away from Touran. But he’s chosen to keep us there... even though there’s nothing to be found in this area. Don’t you think that’s strange? It’s bothering me more than a little.”

“But the Commander... a traitor?” Ouno bit his lip. “I can’t... I can’t picture it. Can you?”

“Not really.” Kayu grimaced. “That’s why I want to prove it’s not true. And that’s why I’m following him. Because I want to be able to report to Kikei-sama that the Commander is on the Emperor’s side and that Toroki was lying. That’s why we’ve come up the mountain. Do you understand now?”

“Yes. I understand.” Ouno’s expression became grave. “Although... Toroki’s a prophet, isn’t she? I mean, isn’t it... didn’t Miramu say that her predictions... came true?”

“Toroki’s sight shouldn’t be ignored.” Kitora was the one who answered this time, and Kayu cast her a quizzical glance.

“Kitora?”

“You can trust a mage of Byakko to know about Byakko’s people, can’t you?” Kitora sent him a teasing look, a predatorial glint in her feline eyes. “I know all about Toroki. All... about... her.”

“So you believe her prediction is sound?” Ouno murmured, and Kitora shrugged.

“Probably.” She agreed carelessly. “When she predicts something, it’s Toroki’s power that speaks. Not the one who bears it. It’s

instinctive — you see? She doesn't choose to see it, or say it. But her words must be heard, regardless. Therefore Toroki's gift cannot be compromised. If she was lying to you, Kayu, there's a very easy way to tell. Her eyes, when she spoke to you — how were they?"

Kayu frowned, an involuntary shiver touching his body as he remembered the distant, almost mad look in the woman's gaze as she had spoken the words.

"She looked like she wasn't really there." He replied, and Kitora spread her hands.

"Then Toroki spoke through her, and the prophesy is the truth." She said matter-of-factly. "Your Emperor will be betrayed."

She tut-tutted, shaking her head.

"A shame, isn't it?" She said lightly. "Such a handsome Emperor... he must be a fool, if he's so easy to take off his guard. And by one of tribal blood. Well, it doesn't look so good for your Commander, then... does it?"

"Hyoushin-sama." Ouno's dark eyes flickered with alarm, and Kayu gripped his reins more tightly in his hands, fighting his own emotions as he sought to keep a hold on his composure.

"Up ahead." He murmured. "The horse tracks end there. Hyoushin-sama must have tethered his animal hereabouts... which means he's gone somewhere on foot. Ouno, you and Kitora stay here. I'm going to see if I can see where he went."

"Alone?" Ouno stared, and Kayu nodded.

"Better only one of us gets into trouble." He said grimly. "All right? If I don't come back before the sun's shifted to the other side of the sky, go back without me. But I'll be careful... and I'll come back as soon as I can."

"You're leaving me with the witch?" Ouno looked uncertain, and Kitora let out a peal of laughter.

"I'll not hurt you, little boy." She promised. "You're no fun. I'd rather wait for Kayu."

Kayu grimaced at her. Then he dismounted his horse, handing the reins to Ouno and pulling his cloak more tightly around his body as he scoured the ground for the footsteps he knew must be somewhere in the soft, freshly fallen snow. At length he spotted them and he nodded, inwardly gathering his composure as he set off to follow them. As he did so, he felt a sense of guilt for spying so blatantly on

his Commander, but he quelled it, considering Kitora's words as he trudged forward through the snow.

"She's a mad bitch but she is Byakko's. And I think she knows about Toroki." He muttered. "So I... I think I believe her. Which means..."

He frowned, his brows knitting together as he negotiated a difficult section of path, drawing onto a fresh ledge as he paused to catch his breath. As he did so, he paused, his eyes widening as he realised where he was.

"This place..." He murmured, taking a step or two forward as he registered the glitter of stones in the snow. "The village we rode through — the one where all the people stayed inside and didn't come out. The one... Hyoushin-sama seemed to know all about, even though he didn't tell us anything much when we were travelling through. Just that we were to ride right through and not stop. But... what's so special about this place? Is this where the Commander's come... where he doesn't want us to be?"

At that point he heard the sound of laughter and he started, darting behind a nearby pine tree as he peered hesitantly around the frost-tinged branches towards the source of the noise. A young child had run out from one of the houses, followed by one a few years older, and with a jolt Kayu realised where he had seen them before.

"In Touran. The children who spoke to the Commander." He whispered. "Shit... then this place is..."

He faltered, as another door opened and an older man stepped out, turning to beckon to his companions. As Kayu watched, his heart skipped a beat as he made out the two figures, one male and one female that followed the stranger out into the snow. The woman was petite, her silvery hair bound back from her face and her clothing as strange to Kayu's uneducated gaze as the young children who played so merrily among the snow and ice. But it was the man who had caught his attention, for his attire was that of the Kutou imperial guard, his hair tied in its warrior's queue and his amethyst gaze set with resolution.

"Hyoushin-sama." Kayu swallowed hard, as he saw the young woman slip her fingers playfully into the Commander's. A strange expression crossed the officer's face, and Kayu's eyes almost fell out of his head as he realised that it was a look of genuine affection that sparkled in his leader's amethyst eyes.

"What the..." He murmured. "They're Meihi. This is a *Meihi* village. Those children in Touran — it wasn't a coincidence. They were

bringing a message... a message to the Commander, to arrange a meeting. And that girl... these people... *this* is what Hyoushin-sama didn't want us to know about! Kikei-sama was right after all — these people are his people, and he is still wound up in his past. He hasn't forgotten. Somehow he's uniting with these people — these tribesmen and women — to hurt Kutou! Maybe he has been biding his time to take revenge after all — by uniting with Hokkan's Meihi, he means to bring down Kintsusei-sama once and for all! Toroki's prediction was right! The Commander is plotting against the Emperor after all — and I have to do something to *stop* it!"

"Are you going to simply lead me in the dark, Bakaru — or are you going to explain to me the conditions by which you'll agree to share with me Genbu's Shinzahou?" Back in the village, unaware of the attention he had attracted, Hyoushin cast the elder an impatient glance, tilting his head on one side as he eyed the older man carefully. "Providing you are telling me the truth and that this is not just some ruse to elicit information from me."

"I don't need any information from you, except that which I already have, my friend." Bakaru rested his hand on the soldier's shoulder, shaking his head as amusement danced in his eyes. "You're Lilaihi. That in itself is enough for me to help you. But I... I'm afraid I must also keep my promises to myself, as well as my promises to Rayi and Kaliri. So you'll have to bear with me a little longer, I'm afraid."

"You're not in a hurry to leave, are you, Nii-chan?" Lirayi cast him an anxious look, and Hyoushin sighed.

"I won't pretend this place doesn't make me uncomfortable." He acknowledged. "But my concern is really for my companions. If I do not return to them, they will wonder why. This mission is under my command... it would be irresponsible of me as a Commander to just ignore that."

He frowned, eying Bakaru a second time.

"What promises do you mean?" He asked softly. "Promises to Rayi and Kaliri? And to yourself?"

"Mm." Bakaru nodded. "Well, of course. You don't think that there's been a single day since I've known Rayi that she hasn't talked about you? When Kaliri passed away, I made a promise to him then to do what I could to protect his sister, until we could find you and reunite you. Rayi believed so strongly that you were still alive, I promised her that if you ever came to this village, I would do

whatever I could to make you welcome here. That no matter how long it took — you would always be able to count on your own people for support and assistance, whenever you should need it.”

“No matter what the situation.” Lirayi murmured. “Because I was worried, Nii-chan. I didn’t know if you were hurt or scared, like I was. So... I made Bakaru promise that even if you came here out of your wits, or crippled... he’d still make it all right for you to be here. Because even that way... I still wanted to have my brother near me. No matter what.”

“Rayi...” Hyoushin faltered, reaching up to touch his sister’s cheek for a moment. Then he frowned.

“But instead you are faced with a man in Kutou’s imperial dress.” He said softly. “The same armour as those men who torched our village... are you really so willing to look past that?”

“You’re not like those men.” Lirayi shook her head. “I have faith in you, so if you believe in Kutou’s new Emperor, so will I. I know you wouldn’t do anything to help the people who killed our family. And if he freed you, Nii-chan, then he must be a good person. So I want to help you, too.”

She smiled, squeezing his hand in hers.

“But first I want you to see the village.” She murmured. “Because even if you are going to leave again, I want you to know that this place is always a safe haven to come to. And I’ll be waiting here... I don’t want you to forget about me.”

“To forget?” A stricken look entered Hyoushin’s amethyst eyes, and Bakaru nodded.

“It’s easier to suppress that past and lock it away, isn’t it?” He said softly. “That is why you originally gave your name as Hyoushin, when truly it is Lilaihi. You’ve made yourself forget the things you don’t want to face. But you haven’t forgotten about Rayi — I’m glad about that. It would have been painful for me as well as her had you come here and not known her... even after so long apart, I couldn’t have stood for that. Rayi’s become as close a thing to family as I have in this village. I love her dearly... and I was always afraid that one day I’d learn that her brother had died. Or, worse, that he did not know her.”

“Some things you never forget completely.” Hyoushin murmured.

“I suppose that’s true.” Bakaru eyed him keenly. “All right, then. I am glad at the very least to have seen you two reunited.”

“And Genbu’s treasure?” Hyoushin asked. “Do you truly know where it is, Bakaru?”

“Of course.” Bakaru nodded. “Like I said, I hid it. I’m the only person who does know where it is.”

“And you will help me to find it, for the sake of my Emperor’s safety?”

“No.” Bakaru shook his head. “If I help you find it, it will be because I believe in you, not because I want to help your Emperor. This is the other promise I made myself, Lilaihi. That I would only ever give up my treasure to someone I felt should have it.”

“And these are your conditions?” Hyoushin sighed. “I see. I must somehow prove to you that I have a just cause, before you will relinquish it into my hands?”

Bakaru smiled, patting him on the shoulder.

“You are a Meihi.” He said quietly. “Even in the military garb of a Kutou soldier, Lilaihi, that is what you are. You know that as well as I do, don’t you?”

“On the contrary, I don’t think I can call myself that these days.” Hyoushin shook his head, glancing at his fingers as he eyed the sword callouses on his left hand and the slave whip scars on his right. ‘*Meihi*’ means tribe of peace. I have sinned against that in many ways since I was taken from my village. It’s not something that can be easily erased... memories, perhaps, but stains on the soul? I don’t think so.”

“What do you mean?” Lirayi stared at him, and Hyoushin offered her a faint smile.

“I am a soldier.” He said simply. “I have fought in my Emperor’s name. I have drawn blood and slain enemies. I have done so and no doubt will do so again. I do not seek to cause death, nor do I take pleasure from it. But it is my duty. And I will uphold my word to my Emperor and protect his life so long as I have life in me. For this end, I am a soldier. And that can’t be undone.”

“And yet you’re still a Meihi, even underneath the blood you think stains your fingers.” Bakaru said lightly. “Whether you know it yet or not, it doesn’t matter. Those values you learnt when you were too small to know any different still dictate who you are, you know. Lilaihi.”

“I would sooner you didn’t use that name.” Hyoushin admitted. “I... it has been... so many years...”

He frowned.

“The last time I heard it was Mother screaming it, as I was taken away.” He said quietly, his voice wavering slightly as he fought with his composure. “I do not wish... to hear it again. It is too... I do not...”

He faltered, and Lirayi’s eyes softened.

“Nii-chan.” She murmured, slipping her arm around him as she hugged him tightly. “I’m sorry. I didn’t even think...”

“It’s not your fault.” Hyoushin shook his head. “I just... it is easier... not to remember those things. That’s all.”

“Then you may find it difficult, what I am going to ask of you.” Bakaru said slowly. Hyoushin’s eyes narrowed.

“Explain.” He said evenly. “And let me be the judge of that. For my Emperor’s quest, I will put myself through a great deal — I owe him everything, after all.”

“You are that dedicated to his cause, then?”

“I am.” Hyoushin agreed. “So tell me. What is it you would have me do, to prove my worth to you?”

Bakaru smiled.

“Tonight, you will stay here.” He said quietly, and Hyoushin’s eyes opened wide with surprise.

“But what about my men?”

“They will have to manage.” Bakaru shook his head. “I am not concerned with them. Only with you. If you want me to reveal what I know about the Shinzahou, you must comply with my wishes — and humour me. You see... I have seen as much of this world as you have. And the more of it I saw, the more I was resolved... that I would only ever entrust Genbu’s treasure to one of my own people. To a Meihi... because of all the peoples in this world, only the Meihi truly believe in peace.”

“I’m not sure that is true.” Hyoushin shook his head. “I do not think peace is a simply Meihi concept, Bakaru. I think you have become jaded by the experiences of your past. Besides, you have already said that I am a Meihi... I do not understand the implications of your words.”

“You are a Meihi dressed in the uniform of our people’s oppressors.” Bakaru said quietly, and for a moment, a flicker of

something other than geniality flared in his gaze as for the first time Hyoushin realised that sorrow and pain lurked deep in the gentle man's heart. "The people who took my brother from me... even as a Meihi, I find it hard to forgive the past. Yes, I live with it, and can accept that it happened. But I will not relinquish Genbu's treasure into such hands. As a soldier of Kutou, Lilaihi — I cannot help you. As Hyoushin, I will not. But as Lilaihi — as Rayi's older brother — yes, that I will consider."

"Then what would you have me do?"

"First, we need to do something about how you are dressed." Bakaru reflected. "As I said, tonight you'll stay here. Tomorrow I'll see to it myself that you're cleansed and robed properly as a man of the tribe should be. And then — if you are willing to submit to me as Liliahi — I will take you to the sacred, special place which houses Genbu's treasure. It is a place that only Meihi may go. And I will not take you unless you make up your mind that that is what you are."

Hyoushin stared at him for a moment, a flicker of fear dancing up inside of him as he registered the man's meaning.

"To spend the night in a Meihi village, with Meihi custom and Meihi ritual..." He whispered. "In Meihi clothing, speaking Meihi tongue... this is what you ask of me? To relive the life that was taken away from me twenty-five years ago?"

"Yes." Bakaru smiled. "Well? What do you think? Do we have a deal?"

Hyoushin hesitated for a moment. Then he frowned, his gaze darkening with resolution as slowly he nodded his head.

"So long as you understand that I will still take that treasure and give it into my Emperor's hands." He said softly. "I will comply with your wishes."

"A Meihi can be trusted to do the right thing." Bakaru spread his hands. "There is no word for 'betrayal' in our language, after all."

He spoke the Chinese word softly, and Hyoushin started at the faint, Meihi inflection in his tones.

"I didn't think about that before." He acknowledged. "Perhaps that makes us foolish as a race, to be so willing to expect trust to be returned."

"Perhaps." Bakaru agreed. "But I also know that, once you give me your word, you will not break it. So if I trust Genbu's treasure to you,

I am sure that so long as it is in your hands, only good can come of it. Will you give me your vow, as a Meihi, to take Genbu's treasure only in the pursuit of peace?"

"Without hesitation." Hyoushin held up his hands, pushing them together in a Meihi gesture of acceptance. "That I can swear without a second thought, Bakaru. Of all things, peace is what I seek — for all those who suffer in Kutou. Not just Meihi, but all of the Eastern peoples. It is not just for Kintsusei-sama that I do this deed. So long as there are slaves, I am still a slave at heart. And so long as people suffer, I will keep trying to stop it. If I can prevent Kutou's children from seeing the world I saw when I was a child, then I will be content. For the sake of peace, I will do whatever it takes. You have my word — both as a Meihi and a Commander of Kutou's Imperial Guard. I will only use Genbu's Shinzahou in the pursuit of peace."

"Well said." Bakaru's eyes sparkled with approval. "Though I am not surprised. From how Rayi described her brother — I knew Lilaihi was a resolute, principled young man even at ten years old. To see him grown, you are no disappointment to my expectations. Your parents chose well when they named you, you know. All three of you, in truth. Kaliri, whose faithfulness protected Rayi from certain death, even at the cost of his own life. Lirayi, whose hope for your survival has never waned. And you, Lilaihi — for whom peace is the ultimate objective. I am glad. Your Emperor is more fortunate than he probably knows... to have a Meihi on his side."

"Perhaps he is." Despite himself, Hyoushin returned the smile with a faint one of his own. "Although I'm sure he hasn't thought of it in such terms before."

He sighed.

"I will play along with your games." He added. "And tomorrow, I will take the Shinzahou and rejoin my men. Whatever you say, Bakaru, I believe you share my wish to see peace in this world, too. And for that reason, I will trust you... after all, you have cared for my sister so well for so long. I have no reason to doubt you."

"Then let's do something about those clothes." Bakaru suggested. "Even if it's just for one night, Lilaihi... I'm going to remind you just how much a part of you your Meihi heritage is. It's that which makes you strong inside, you know. Your name is a spell your mother cast at birth, and it guides you even though you live under a name given by another. Don't ever forget that, all right? Your true self is far stronger than the one you've assumed... don't lose him in your desire to be free of your past. At the end of the day, you can't escape who you really

are. And if you really want to succeed in your goal, you will need to embrace that self completely and accept it as a part of you.”

He smiled.

“After all, those with frozen hearts can’t save Kutou from its own destruction.” He said softly, resting a hand on the Commander’s shoulder as he met the startled soldier’s gaze with a serious one of his own. “I know very well what Hyoushin means in Chinese, and that its meaning is false when compared to your true soul. I want to try and thaw that a little, I think.”

“You’re a canny individual, you know.”

“Age brings such things.” Bakaru laughed. “Perhaps you’re right.”

He gestured towards the house.

“Well.” He said softly. “Are you ready? It’s time to be Lilaihi again.”

“Well, well. Another report from your obedient little spy?”

Miramu lounged up against one of the pillars of Seiryuu’s shrine, casting the priest an amused smile as Kikei turned, impatience flickering in his beady dark eyes.

“You took your time.” He said sharply. “Where have you been, Miramu? I gave you an important errand!”

“You should relax more.” Miramu’s smile widened, as he slipped his fingers into the folds of his clothing, producing something which he held out to his companion. The priest flexed a fat hand in Miramu’s direction, and with a sigh, the assassin dropped the object into his companion’s waiting grasp.

“Your Emperor is a conscientious man.” He added. “I couldn’t take it from his grip, and he was issuing papers on the Southern Province and that Koku soldier’s replacement. I had to wait until he was finished. I always get the job done, you know — you shouldn’t worry so much.”

“Well, I suppose now is better than never.” Kikei glanced down, running his fingers greedily over the smooth carved form of the Imperial seal. “Kayu has indeed spoken to me this evening, Miramu. He’s agitated. I won’t pretend I understand what it is that’s going on in the North — the boy said something about Hyoushin and some northern Meihi — but Kayu believes there’s conspiracy involved and the mood is becoming uneasy. More to the point, Hyoushin hadn’t yet

returned to the inn in Touran. Now is the best time for me to strike — and with this in my possession, there'll be no reason for the order to be doubted."

"The order?" Miramu said sharply. "Not an execution order?"

"Didn't I already promise that task to you?" Kikei looked amused. "No. Simply to relieve him of his duties. No more. I am a priest. Ordering someone's death would be unseemly."

"Of course." Miramu's eyes danced with ironic humour. "All right. I'll play along. Do you want me to take the message myself to the north country? I'd wager I'm a quicker envoy than any of your heralds."

"Miramu, this isn't a game."

"I know." Miramu agreed. "But I am in the pay of both you and your Emperor. The message will be penned by you and authorised by the Imperial Seal. What better messenger than me?"

Kikei eyed him for a moment, and Miramu grinned.

"Do you not trust me? Kikei, I'm hurt!"

"Very well." Kikei's eyes narrowed. "But listen to me, Miramu. You take the message and you deliver it directly into Kayu's hands. Do you understand? To noone else but him. You must not speak to anyone else among the party, and you must not — I repeat, not — be seen by Hyoushin before the order has been put into play. I don't want to give him a warning of what we're about. You are simply to take the letter and pass it to my boy. Understood?"

"Your boy." Miramu's lip curled derisively. "Sometimes I think you are fonder of him than just as your puppet, you know."

"I am." Kikei nodded. "He is a good, obedient and smart young man with great potential. Of course I'm fond of him. What mentor wouldn't be?"

"I'm not sure that's what I meant." Miramu shook his head, and Kikei eyed him quizzically.

"Then what?"

"I would say more like father and son, perhaps."

"If I believe Hyoushin, you are not the person to speak about father and son relationships, Miramu." A cruel glint entered the Priest's eyes, and Miramu's gaze darkened.

“True enough.” He acknowledged coolly. “But I know enough about it to know its importance. You are fond of Kayu... even though you use him as your puppet. He’ll become your weakness if you’re not careful.”

“I doubt it.” Kikei snorted. “If you imagine I’ll resort to such attention as Hyoushin pays that Kaiga boy... you misread me completely.”

Miramu pursed his lips.

“You underestimate that Kaiga boy.” He reflected lightly, and Kikei’s eyes narrowed.

“And what does that mean?” He demanded. “Is this part of the reason you would not obey an order to kill him?”

“Ah.” A smile twitched at Miramu’s lips and he shook his head. “Aoiketsu is like me. He is my reflection — my shadow. Spawned by evil into this world without a clue as to his true nature or identity. Why would I kill him? He could just as easily be me, but for the intervention of one thing.”

“One thing?” Kikei grimaced. “You’re talking in riddles, assassin.”

“If you don’t understand my meaning, priest, you’re a simpler man than I took you for.” Miramu settled himself more comfortably against Seiryuu’s statue, gazing at his mentor in some amusement. “Aoiketsu has been sculpted into the person he is, you know. He is loyal to the death where both his Emperor and his Commander are concerned. That is the difference between him and me. And you should not underestimate him. Hyoushin is an easy enemy to dispatch, but you do not want to put yourself on the wrong side of that boy.”

“You think I am afraid of a child who vomits at the sight of blood?” Kikei was scornful, and Miramu chuckled.

“Well, Lord Priest, I will bow to your greater understanding.” He said, a faintly mocking edge to his words. “But just in case I’m right, you should listen to me anyway. If I’m right about that boy... about his blood, and the line from which he comes... you should beware indeed. Because he has as great a potential as I do for ruthless efficiency. And you would be a fool to discount him, when Hyoushin is eradicated from the equation.”

“Is that a threat or a warning?” Kikei raised an eyebrow. “Are you inheriting Toroki’s talent for prediction now, Miramu? Or do you know something you think I don’t? I’m well acquainted with the Kaiga family’s bloodthirsty past, you know. I knew Kaiga Gin. I know the

kind of man who sired Aoiketsu, even if you do not. But I also knew his mother. And the boy is like her — weak and inconsistent when it comes to action. He is no threat to me... and you do yourself no favours drawing comparisons between the two of you. You are far more useful... don't think otherwise."

"Some kind of backhanded compliment that is." Miramu reflected. "All right. I suppose you know what you're saying. Then I'll add no more to the discussion and await your finished message to take to Hokkan. I could use a little trip out, and I've never been to the snowlands."

"Just remember my instructions. No killing. No communication. Just take it to Kayu." Kikei reminded him, and Miramu bowed his head mockingly in the priest's direction.

"It's understood." He said softly. "I'll do it exactly as you say — don't worry. I won't go near Hyoushin yet. I have to have time to prepare for him, after all... this isn't just any kind of prey to me, and I want to make sure I have the perfect plan in mind before I act."

"Then it's settled." Kikei nodded. "I'll begin my letter at once. And then we can really begin to get things in motion."

Chapter 17

Chapter Sixteen

“Even with a full day in front of us, this path isn’t going to be easy going, is it?”

As the group of Southern travellers bid their kindly host goodbye and headed into the mountains, it was Shishi who voiced this observation, gripping the reins of her chestnut steed tightly in her hands as they followed the rocky pathway upwards. The previous afternoon, Tamatama had found the promised charts and several hours had been spent poring over them as Aoiketsu and Myoume discussed potential routes through the caves to the Northern territories. At length a path had been agreed, and so, as soon as breakfast had been finished, the party had begun once more on their difficult hike, aware that they would have to abandon their horses before entering the caves. Despite this, Myoume had pointed out that the first part of the journey would still be quicker on horseback, and Tamatama had promised to ensure that the beasts were recovered and cared for in Yukigase to wait for their return.

“It’s a mountain. That sort of goes without saying.” Hikari said now, shielding her gaze from the glare of the sun on the snow. “I wish I’d brought sunglasses... I didn’t think it’d be so bright.”

“Sunglasses?” Shishi shot her a quizzical look, and Hikari grinned.

“Let’s not even try.” She said ruefully. “It’s a my-world thing. Don’t worry about it.”

“You’re quiet this morning, Aoi-kun.” Myoume cast the final member of the party a questioning glance. “Are you all right? You didn’t eat a lot at breakfast — are you feeling unwell?”

“No... I’m all right.” Aoiketsu shook his head, offering her a faint smile. “I’m just thinking over what Maichu said yesterday. That’s all.”

“You’ve not told us anything that happened after you left Tamatama-san’s house yesterday.” Shishi’s eyes narrowed. “Something you want to share?”

“Not really.” Aoiketsu sighed. “Just... he told me that someone I’d known when I was younger had been killed in a skirmish near the southern Kutou border. He was a good man — a good soldier. Kinda

hit home a little... that's all. I've been sent to this peaceful place, and I've fallen on my feet despite the reasons I came here. I'm useless, but I'm safe. But Maru fought for his Emperor and died trying to defend the southern lands. I guess... it bothered me some."

"A friend of yours died?" Hikari's eyes widened in horror, and Aoiketsu nodded.

"Yes." He agreed. "Maru was... well, when Maichu and I were twelve or thirteen, he was first seconded to the south. Two years after that he was officially made Captain and he was there all the time, then. He was one of the finest soldiers Kutou had. But... this time... his luck ran out. It seems sort of surreal... but when you're a soldier, and you hear about someone you know dying, it... it makes you remember how close to death you are. That all the training you do is just to prolong your life another day so you can wake up and fight for it all over again. That's all. Nothing more."

"Shit." Shishi murmured. "You don't half think deep about stuff, Aoi... that's depressing."

"But it's true." Aoiketsu sighed. "I'm sorry. But..."

He hesitated, glancing up at the sky.

"I've been trained to fight since I was five." He murmured. "In that time, lots of soldiers died for the Emperor's sake. And it was... a terrible thing. But accepted, too. This time, though... I don't feel that way. I think... it's because... of Jin that I feel this way."

"Because of Jin?" Shishi stared. "Why in hell? You never met him!"

"I know." Aoiketsu agreed. "But see, Jin wasn't a soldier, Shishi. And... and when you're in the barracks, everyone knows about deaths, but it's a part of soldier life. So... so no one cries. No one lets... no one allows themselves to show those kinds of feelings. But... here... since I came here... it's been different. This time I've seen... the family of the person killed. I've seen the grief. The way it affects other people outside when something happens like this. And I... I don't like it. I don't have a family outside of the Imperial court. The Kaiga family are dead, and so is Nakago... all of that is gone. So to me, the soldiers *are* my family. But... but Maru had a fiancée. I know that. And... and I know that... he said when the fighting was over in the south, he'd come back to the capital and marry her. Little things like that... that war isn't just about sacrificing your life, but about sacrificing a whole family, too."

"Aoi..." Hikari's eyes became troubled, and she slipped her hand

over his. "It's true that we all miss Jin. Shishi especially. But what he did... he did it for us, you know."

"I know." Aoiketsu nodded. "It just... it bothers me more than it did. That I've been training to fight for so long without understanding what it actually meant to be a soldier. And I'm not afraid of dying — I don't have anyone like that to leave behind, really. But... it isn't just me that's fighting this war. And I understand why Chichiri and Tasuki want to keep conflict out of Kounan. Kutou's a really messed up place... I guess I saw that really clearly when Maichu told me about Maru."

"I'm sorry about your friend, Aoi." Myoume said gravely. "It's true that there are no winners in war."

"So we'll find Doryoku, and then Genbu's Shinzahou." Shishi added. "Right? We'll put a stop to it and then no one else will have to die. Okay?"

"Yes." Aoiketsu agreed.

"Did you warn Maichu... about Myoume's predictions?" Hikari asked and Aoiketsu nodded.

"Somewhat." He admitted. "I trust him, and I hope I did the right thing. Of everyone in Kutou, Maichu and Hyoushin-sama are the people that mean the most to me. I don't know if I'd accept it, if something happened to either one of them. It wouldn't be like losing a comrade, but more like losing family. I'm realising these things properly for the first time... I guess maybe this is Suzaku's influence on me, or something. But that's how I'm coming to see things."

"Then I hope your faith in the Meihi is justified." Myoume said softly. Aoiketsu frowned.

"I know him. You don't." He said shortly. "I can't explain your vision, but I know he's not a traitor. So that's all there is to it."

"If Aoi has faith in him, I'm willing to believe in it, too." Hikari murmured, and Shishi sighed.

"Of course you are, you lovesick idiot." She said frankly. "It's written all over your face — if Aoi told you to believe in the horse, you'd do it."

"That's not fair!" Hikari flushed red, embarrassment on her face. "Aoi and I aren't... we're not... and you... stop it, all right? It's not like that... I just... if Aoi believes in him that much, he must have reasons. Right?"

“And you believe in Aoi.” Myoume offered her a slight smile. “Don’t you?”

“I...” Hikari glanced down, then, slowly, she nodded her head.

“I do.” She murmured, raising her gaze to meet his self-consciously. “Because I’m in love with him, and I can’t do anything about that. It might be because of Suzaku or it might be because of Seiryuu. It might be simply because you said we were connected, Myoume. But... I... can’t help it. It’s just how it is.”

“If you don’t want to fall off the horse, Hikari, please don’t make love confessions when I’m trying to avoid uneven ground.” Aoiketsu looked rueful. “It’s nice and all, but its distracting. And although I’m glad that you... aren’t cross with me any more, I’d rather not land us both in the snow.”

“Sorry.” Hikari looked sheepish. “I’ll shut up.”

“We’re reaching a fork in the road.” Myoume gestured up ahead. “Left or right — Aoi, you’ve got the chart. Which do we need to take?”

“Left.” Aoiketsu said evenly. ‘I memorised the chart before we left, so I’m pretty sure. The cave that collapsed is that way.’ He gestured with the reins. “And I think there should still be a way in. If Bachisu-san came here and hid the relic, there must be. So we go left... and we should see a small entrance in the rock face, if we look for it carefully.”

“Bachisu-san said it was mostly covered by mountain ferns.” Shishi remembered. “The Kounan-side entrance — or exit — to the cave where he hid Doryoku’s relic, I mean. So it might be hard to spot.”

“Probably. He wanted it to be a safe place.” Myoume nodded. “Hikari, I don’t suppose you can sense anything?”

“Nope.” Hikari shook her head. “Should I?”

“No, but it was worth a try.” Myoume sighed. “I guess maybe Chichiri is right and your power isn’t so strong away from the south. Although this isn’t a Shinzahou.”

“You can’t either?” Shishi asked, and Myoume shrugged.

“I’m Byakko’s. Wrong God again.” She said helplessly. “If Doryoku had been woken, then yes, I’d sense her. But... she’s still sleeping. It’s just an artefact. And I can’t sense it.”

“But this is what you were seeing, when you saw snow and caves?” Aoiketsu asked quietly. Myoume nodded.

“It looks familiar.” She agreed. “Which is something of a relief. At least now I know what that means. And because I’ve come close to explaining that particular vision, other things should become clearer as a result. At least, I hope so. I feel like there are so many gaps still in my knowledge and it’s frustrating when time is so precious.”

“It’s all right, you know.” Hikari offered her a smile. “Your sight has been a major help to us so far. You shouldn’t worry so much... without it we’d have been stuck a long time ago.”

“Hiki’s right.” Shishi reined in her horse, nodding her head. “And I think this is the end of the road for the horse-bound part of the journey. Tamatama-san said there should be somewhere we can tether them here. Aoi, kick Hiki down from there, huh? While we tie the animals up, she can find the entrance.”

“Hey!” Hikari protested. “Gently, please! Don’t listen to her, Aoi — I don’t want to fall!”

“I wouldn’t let you fall.” Aoiketsu said softly, and Hikari’s eyes widened as she met his gaze. Her cheeks pinkened, and he offered her a faint smile, carefully supporting her as she clambered down to the ground below. “There. See?”

“This is almost nauseating.” Shishi sighed. “I’d tell you to get a room, except that it might be a problem if Suzaku no Shinzahou needs to be a virgin at the end of all of this.”

“*Shishi!*” Hikari’s eyes widened with horror, her cheeks flushing scarlet at the bluntness of her friend’s observation. “What the hell kind of remark is that?”

“I’m a realist.” Shishi put her hands on her hips. “How old do you think I am, Hiki? I wasn’t born yesterday.”

“Hikari’s right.” Aoiketsu gathered his wits, shooting the young bandit an admonishing glance. “Shut up, okay, and keep your mind on the matter at hand!”

Shishi smirked, but she made no comment, instead dismounting her own horse as she scanned the surrounds for somewhere to tether the animal. As she did so, Hikari began to scour the rocky surface for a hidden cave entrance, her cheeks still blazing from the directness of Shishi’s remarks.

“What does she think I came here to do?” She muttered to herself furiously as she ran her hands along the cold stone surface. “Sure, I like Aoi. Hell, I... I guess I love him. I said it, and... and I’m sure that’s what it is. But even so... dammit, I’ve known him a few *weeks*! What

kind of a girl does she think I am? Honestly! As if we didn't have enough to do without her making innuendoes..."

She sighed, leaning up against the stone as she glanced across at the Kutou soldier.

"It's a little scary, how much I feel connected to him." She realised. "It must be like Myoume said — it's because we're tied together and we were meant to meet. But... even so... I never thought I'd meet anyone in this world that I'd feel so strongly about. Or that he'd be... from the other side."

She frowned, remembering the battle with the slave traders in Choukou.

"He had that look in his eye — the killer instinct, the soldier." She reflected. "But I guess... I can live with that. Still, am I being foolish? Mother and Father went through a lot to be together. Aoi and I... there's just no way that we can be. So I shouldn't let my guard down so much. I shouldn't *let* myself feel this way... because it's stupid. No matter what happens, I... I'll be going back to my world when this is over. And when I do that, Aoi and I won't see each other again. I won't be hanging out with Shishi or Myoume any more, or doing any of this kind of stuff. I'll just be Sukunami Hikari, middle school student... preparing for exams I don't totally understand."

Her brows knitted together as she realised how much this thought unsettled her.

"Don't I *want* to go home, now?" She wondered with a jolt. "That's stupid. Mother and Father are there. I'm missing them like crazy. And Arina... she'll worry about me, won't she? But even so... even so..."

She faltered, her gaze resting on Shishi as she remembered that girl's words.

"She doesn't like being alone, and Jin's not there any more." She realised. "Oh, dammit. This sucks. No matter what happens, it's going to suck."

"Hey, Hiki, are you looking for a way in or are you admiring Aoi's horse-tying technique?" The bandit's distinctive accent broke through her thoughts at that moment and she started, flushing red anew as she wheeled round to glare at her friend.

"I'm thinking!" She snapped. "Something you don't do enough of before you speak! Besides, I can't find any way in and my fingers are cold... you look too, instead of standing there making silly comments!"

Myoume laughed, carefully fastening her horse's ties as she glanced from girl to girl.

"Travelling with the pair of you is refreshing after spending so long in the Western peaks." She reflected, amusement in her eyes. "But do you think you could keep it down a little more? Loud noises can cause avalanches, after all — and on the ledges above us there's a good amount of fairly fresh, loose snow."

"Shit." Shishi glanced up, eying the ledges anxiously. "I'd forgotten about that."

"It would serve you right if a great big lump of snow fell on your head." Hikari muttered, and Shishi poked out her tongue.

"That's not helping us find anything, either." She scolded. "Come on, Hiki. It's cold and we want to get to Touran before it's dark — don't we?"

"I think I have something." Before Hikari could retort, Aoiketsu held up his hands, being careful to mute his tones in case of dislodging loose snow. "Over here. It's grown over, but... I think..."

He trailed off, and Myoume came to his side, running her own gloved fingers over the thick mountain briar.

"There's definitely an opening... the briars give a little at this point." She agreed. "Shishi, bring your sword... see if you can cut them through."

"All right." Shishi agreed, pulling her blade from its sheath and angling it against the broad blackish-green stems. It took a few swipes, but at length the snake-like greenery fell away to reveal a sizeable opening in the mountain rock. Hikari's eyes lit up with hope.

"Surely that's it?" She murmured. "It must be... mustn't it?"

"I think so." Aoiketsu nodded. "Myoume — what do you think?"

Myoume removed her right glove, pressing her hand against the stone. She frowned.

"Something's here." She agreed. "It feels familiar. Like we're in the right place. Yes. I think we should go in."

"It's dark." Hikari reported. "I suppose we don't have anything we can make a torch with? There might be spiders in there... and I don't want to get bitten."

"More likely to be bitten by mountain snakes than spiders." Shishi said frankly, and Hikari shivered.

“In which case, a torch is definitely looking like a good idea.” She said evenly. “Any ideas?”

“I suppose this might do.” Aoiketsu bent to pick up a discarded length of the ropeish vine. “It’s frozen cold, but it’s not particularly damp. If we had a way to light it... it’s hard as a tree branch, and from the feel of it, I think it’d burn slowly, not quickly like wood.”

“Trust a bandit to provide a flame.” Shishi grinned, producing a piece of flint from her pocket and holding out her hand for the vine. “Give it to me, Aoi. My father’s the expert on starting fires... I’ll do it.”

“With pleasure.” Aoiketsu held it out, and deftly Shishi struck the stone against the cold mountain face, producing a spark. The first try failed to ignite, but she persevered, and soon the branch burned with a strange blueish gold flame.

Hikari eyed it warily.

“Even the flame is blue with cold.” She murmured, rubbing her hands together. “All right. Are we going in?”

“I’ll lead the way.” Shishi was already scrambling into the narrow space. “After all, it was me that Bachisu-san asked to do this. I’m the one Doryoku has been entrusted to — so if I go first, there’s no way she’ll fight me. I have Bachisu-san’s blood, after all.”

“She’s not awake.” Myoume shook her head. “You’ll have to find the relic and wake her — she won’t attack us because right now she’s not sentient.”

“Even so, I still know more than you do.” Was Shishi’s smart reply, as she disappeared into the darkness. “Stop dawdling, you people. Let’s find this thing, huh?”

“She’s keen.”

As they followed their impetuous companion into the cold black of the cave, Aoiketsu sent Hikari a rueful grin, softening his tones so that the bandit could not hear him.

“Travelling with Shishi’s rather like travelling with an active volcano, isn’t it? You never know when she’ll explode next.”

Hikari chuckled, nodding her head.

“It is.” She agreed. “But I guess that’s not always a bad thing. I mean, I think Bachisu-san must have known she’s strong, to have trusted her with this. If it were me... I wouldn’t have been able to take on that task in the way Shishi has. Or kept my head trapped in that

building with a dead body and a man with a sword. She says stupid stuff sometimes — but often I wish I was as brave as she is.”

“Or as thoughtless.” Aoiketsu murmured. “That’s what it is, you know. She doesn’t have time to be scared because she just dives in.”

“Mm.” Hikari sighed. “But people in this world are strong. They deal with so many hard things. It’s difficult sometimes to keep up with them. I have to do something great at the end of all this... something hard, and I don’t know if I’m able to do it. But I have to find a way... because so many people have done so much to help me so far. And I don’t want to let anyone down.”

“Then you’ll go back to your world, won’t you?” Aoiketsu reflected, and Hikari eyed him sharply, unable to fully read his expression in the flickering light of Shishi’s makeshift torch. “And that will be that. The world will be saved and everything will go back to normal.”

“Whatever that is.” Hikari sighed. “Let’s not worry about that right now, huh? We haven’t found Doryoku or the Shinzou yet. One thing at a time.”

“There’s an opening ahead!” Shishi reported, before Aoiketsu could respond. “I think there are sconces... it looks like someone camped here before. Maybe it was the circus — I’m going to light the torches and we’ll see.”

“It certainly looks like a sturdy enough chamber.” Myoume reflected, as Shishi carefully touched her branch to the aging, dusty wall sconces, and the chamber became bathed in soft firelight. “And that someone was here before we were. There are tunnels leading off, too — this might be a good time to get your map out, Aoi. I think that the way to the North is probably that way...”

She pointed.

“But we need to find Doryoku first. And Shishi — do you remember what Bachisu-san said exactly about her location?”

“Yes.” Shishi agreed. “The third passage clockwise and keep going down. She’s a Mage of the Earth so that’s where she’s hidden.”

“That’s almost a riddle.” Hikari mused. “Hidden in the earth? In the ground, then?”

“Well, if you count from where we entered, that one is the third passage.” Aoiketsu pointed. “So that must be where we need to go.”

“No good.” Myoume shook her head. “That one’s caved in. That must be where Nuriko-san fought Yukiya — there’s nothing but

rubble and no way through.”

“Then how...” Hikari faltered, and Shishi frowned, sitting down on the floor of the chamber as she glanced around her.

“The third passage clockwise and keep going down.” She murmured. “Aoi, you were counting from there... from where we entered. But Bachisu-san didn’t come from Kounan to this place. He and the circus came from Hokkan. So... we’re looking at it backwards. If that path leads to the North... the third passage is... this one. Over here. To the right.”

“She’s right, you know.” Myoume nodded. “That would make sense.”

“In that case, we should press on.” Aoiketsu took a tentative few steps towards the opening, taking one of the torches from a nearby scone and waving it in the darkness beyond. He let out an exclamation, holding his free arm out to prevent the impetuous Shishi from pushing past him.

“The floor’s cracked away.” He explained, as she shot him a quizzical look. “It’s there in places, but not in others. Maybe there was an earthquake... I don’t know if it’s safe for us to go in.”

“Bachisu-san did.” Shishi shook her head. “It must be okay.”

“Not if it’s happened since he was here.” Myoume pointed out. “Aoi’s right, Shishi — we need to be careful. I won’t face Tasuki if you get hurt.”

“Shit.” Shishi frowned. “Then what are we meant to do? How bad is it, anyway? Let me see, Aoi... I won’t go in, but I want to see.”

“Sure.” Aoiketsu held the flame through the opening once more, and Shishi squinted into the darkness.

“It is pretty uneven.” She admitted. “But I’m thinking about what Bachisu-san said. About it being down. What if this was like this when he was here? What if Doryoku’s hidden in one of these crevices?”

“You think maybe Bachisu-san used that weird power of his and created the cracks?” Hikari suggested.

“I would have thought his circus buddies might have noticed that.” Myoume reflected. “I think an earthquake is more probable. Unless... maybe Doryoku did it herself. After all, if he said she was the Mage of the Earth...”

“What are you thinking, Myoume?” Shishi cast her an expectant

look, and Myoume frowned.

“If Doryoku is truly Genbu’s representative, then surely her mage magic relates to the earth. The ground beneath our feet.” She said slowly. “That’s what Bachisu-san told you — right?”

“Yes.” Shishi’s eyes narrowed. “So... she made the floor this way? So noone could jump in and find her easily?”

“If she and Bachisu-san had a rapport, its possible.” Myoume shrugged. “The relic that I helped guard was sealed within the Sairou mountains and I never woke her or spoke to her. I had no connection to her at all. I don’t even think I would have done, even if Miramu had been Amefuri — I think she would have been his to guard, not mine, because I was given Byakko’s mirror when I was a very small child. But... even so... if Genbu’s is different...”

She sighed, rubbing her temples.

“The Meihi are not the same as indigenous Hokkan-jin.” She murmured. “Even though they are just as much from the North. From the little I know about them, they don’t follow the faith of the Four Gods. So Genbu’s choice of celestial warrior is interesting. As interesting as Seiryuu choosing a Hin, in fact, in Nakago. It’s almost a divine gamble — an attempt to unify the peoples of the land even despite their differences. But if the Meihi don’t have shrines or temples to Genbu, I can see why the relic was trusted to Bachisu-san in person. He had no divine place to seal her — so he kept her with him. And if that’s so, they must have had some kind of a bond.”

She gestured to the darkness.

“I think Shishi’s the only one of us who should try going in there.” She added. “And I’m not a hundred percent happy about letting her, but I think it’s the only way. Shishi, Bachisu-san entrusted you with his blood — with the key to her hiding place. Therefore you should be the one to find her. That way, if she does rise up — if the ground becomes unsteady — she won’t seek to hurt you.”

“Are you sure it’s safe for her to do that?” Hikari looked doubtful, peering over Aoiketsu’s shoulder at the broken floor beyond. “It looks... pretty bad.”

“I’ll be fine.” Shishi said simply. “Okaasan was an acrobat, remember? And I’ve grown up around mountains. I’m more agile than that. I can manage, I’m sure. And Myoume’s probably right. Bachisu-san said Doryoku would understand the message in his blood. It might be that the two things will sense each other out — right? So I’ll try.”

She pulled her sword from her scabbard, holding it out.

“Aoi, take this for me, huh? It’ll be awkward to jump with it at my side.” She added, and Aoiketsu nodded, taking it carefully in his grip.

“No problem.” He agreed. “Just be careful, huh? We don’t want to come in and scrape you off the floor.”

“You’d pass out if that happened.” Shishi told him cheekily. “Don’t worry. I’m not going to smash myself up. I don’t want you throwing up everywhere — this cave is cramped and I don’t like bad smells.”

Before Aoiketsu could respond, she had taken the torch from him, disappearing into the tunnel beyond.

“Do you really think she’ll be all right?” Hikari asked Myoume anxiously, and Myoume bit her lip.

“I don’t know.” She admitted. “Shishi’s not from Hokkan, and she has no connection to Genbu. None of us do. It’s not guaranteed that Doryoku will accept her and agree to help us, even though Bachisusan sent us here. And yet... of all of us...”

“She’s the only one with any chance.” Aoiketsu leant back against the cavern wall, folding his arms across his chest. “Besides, the girl’s been itching to prove herself since we got moving, you know. She has that air about her... that she’s trying to prove her worth.”

“Why would she need to do that?” Hikari looked startled. “She’s Shishi. She doesn’t have anything to prove.”

“Maybe Aoi’s right, though.” Myoume frowned. “When we were in my village, the night Jin died... she said something that she hasn’t said since. She... she was very upset, and... I think it slipped out more than anything. I don’t know whether she even remembers — she talked a lot that night, and cried, and I stayed with her because she was so messed up. Her barriers were right down, and she gave me a good sense of what she was feeling. She hasn’t said it here, but Hikari... she blames herself for Jin’s death as much as she blames Miramu.”

“Herself?” Hikari stared. “Why? *I’m* more to blame than she is!”

“She doesn’t blame you. She hasn’t once.” Myoume shook her head. “But she said to me, if she hadn’t been caught by those thieves, and you hadn’t been held up by her injury, you would have reached my cave sooner. You would have found me first... the Shinzahou, the relic... before Miramu arrived. And Jin would not have been killed.”

“Shishi...” Hikari looked stricken. “That’s silly! She came to my

rescue then — so that would make it even more my fault, not hers!”

“No. I don’t think she’s ever seen it that way.” Myoume frowned. “She said over and over that she and Jin were meant to protect you, but that she’d messed up and Jin’d died because of it. And that she’d failed again, because you’d vanished back to your world and she didn’t know how to bring you back. Shishi’s confidence took a knock when Jin died, and it wasn’t just losing a brother and a friend. It was realising her own limitations, too.”

She glanced at Aoiketsu.

“It’s probably why she’s taunted you so much, too.” She added sadly. “Before, it was because you survived when Jin did not. But now... even if it’s in fun... you’ve proven your strength as a fighter. And Shishi’s of the same stock as her father. Strong, loyal, stubborn and impulsive. She wants to be useful. She wants to prove she can play her part too. But she’s still so young, really. It’s so much.”

“Then it’s the best thing we let her do this.” Aoiketsu said quietly. “She doesn’t have a damn thing to prove as far as I see it — but I’ve seen that expression in the eyes of rookies at the barracks, wanting to show the Commander what they can do. And this is Shishi’s chance to do that.”

“It’s like she said the other night, isn’t it?” Hikari looked troubled. “I represent Suzaku’s Shinzahou. Myoume’s one of Byakko’s chosen. Now we know your blood is connected enough to Seiryuu to wake a mage spirit, Aoi — Shishi feels the odd one out.”

Before either of her companions could reply, however, there was a loud whoop from the blackness, and Hikari jumped, almost falling over Aoiketsu’s feet as she jerked backwards. Aoiketsu grabbed her hurriedly, casting a dark look into the gloom.

“Stop shrieking, Shishi — you’ll give us all a heart attack!” He scolded. “What’s so important? Did you find something!”

“Something’s written here.” Came the response, the bandit’s voice not noticeably crushed by his criticism. “Right at the far end of the tunnel the ground evens out. I don’t know what it says — it’s not written in Chinese. But the way it’s put here — I’m sure it must mean something.”

“Do the Meihi have a language?” Hikari cast Myoume a glance, and Myoume nodded.

“They do.” She agreed. “Although Aoi probably knows more about it than me.”

“Why would I?” Aoiketsu frowned, and Myoume arched an eyebrow.

“Your Commander?” She asked, and Aoiketsu shook his head.

“Hyoushin-sama never talks about his past.” He replied. “He’s never spoken any language other than Kutou’s dialect, and if he ever had a Meihi accent, I’ve never heard it. I guess he probably does — or did — speak the Meihi language once... but if he did, he doesn’t now. I know nothing about it at all — how it’s written, or pronounced... or anything like that.”

“And this man is the man you consider your mentor and your guardian?” Myoume said softly. “The one in whom you have faith — yet you know nothing about him before he became Commander of your Imperial Guard?”

“I was five years old when he became my teacher and my Commander.” Aoiketsu said stiffly. “He’d been with the Emperor five years by then, and I never knew him as anything else. I *do* know him, Myoume. I know his nature. I don’t have to know all of his past secrets to know that he’s someone I can have faith in. Your gift makes you overly paranoid, that’s all. You won’t sway me.”

“Are you going to babble about useless shit or are you going to give me some advice about what to do?” Shishi’s impatient tones cut through the rising tension, and Hikari laughed, putting her hands against the wall of the cavern as she leant into the dark hole, fixing her gaze on the flickering light of Shishi’s torch at the far end.

“You’re the one with Bachisu-san’s blood.” She told her. “What do you think you should do?”

“I don’t want to waste it.” Came the reply. “I’m sure this is the place, but... hang on. There’s something... something else...”

She faltered, and there was the sound of scrabbling as Shishi’s abused pocket knife was scraped against the hard mountain stone.

“Shishi?” Aoiketsu called.

“There’s something here. Something wrapped in old fabric.” Shishi’s tones were excited. “Aoi, tell me, when you woke that Suiko mage of yours, how did you do it? Did you just bleed all over the thing... or what?”

“Yes.” Aoiketsu agreed. “But it was accidental, so I don’t know if there’s a proper way to do it or anything.”

“What have you found, exactly?” Myoume demanded, and Shishi

hesitated for a moment. Then,

“It looks like some kind of bracelet.” She admitted. “But it’s difficult to see. I think it must be what we’re looking for but... it looks really simple and, well, plain. It doesn’t seem...”

She sighed.

“Oh well.” She concluded. “I’ll bring it back, and we’ll look at it together. Clear the opening, Hiki. I’m coming through.”

“No problem.” Hikari obediently stepped back, and before long the nimble bandit reappeared in the entranceway, her clothes and face smudged with dust and dirt, but a spark of triumph in her bronze eyes. Carefully she set her prize down in the ground and as one they gathered around it, peering at the odd artefact Shishi had unearthed.

“It looks like a curled piece of old bone.” Aoiketsu squinted at it. “Is that really Genbu’s relic?”

“What did Seiryuu’s look like, Aoi?” Hikari asked, and Aoiketsu frowned.

“It was a scale. But it glittered. It was from Seiryuu so it shone.” He replied. “This isn’t shining. It’s just... there.”

“But Urumiya’s mark appeared in black on Bachisu-san’s forehead.” Shishi remembered. “And think about it — the scale was blue, right? Like Seiryuu. And Byakko’s relic — we never saw it out of its casket, but it was a fang. It was white... just like the mark Myoume has on her finger and that bastard has on his throat. So Genbu’s mark is black. Right? The relic is black.”

“Even so, it is... funny looking.” Hikari bit her lip. “We’re sure that’s it?”

“It’s the only place anything could be hidden in there.” Shishi objected. “I’m telling you, this is what we came to find!”

“Shishi’s right.” Myoume hovered her fingers over the top of the odd black bangle, nodding her head. “There’s a faint sense of something coming from it... in all likelihood it’s carved from a piece of Genbu’s shell. It might not look like much, but that’s the relic of Genbu.”

“Well, I guess we don’t have a lot of experience to go on with these things.” Hikari acknowledged. “Can we wake her? Shishi, if you rub the bloodsoaked rag over it... will it wake her up?”

“Should we do that inside the cave?” Aoiketsu looked anxious.

“You just want to avoid the blood.” Shishi snorted. “It’s fine. We’ll do it here... no sense in going outside when we’re going to travel through the tunnels anyway.”

She fumbled at her belt, pulling out the folded cloth and placing it carefully against the black twist of shell. Nothing happened and she frowned, picking up both the relic and the cloth and examining them closely.

“Is it because I’m Suzaku’s?” She murmured. “She’s taking offence because I’m not Genbu’s property?”

“I’ve an idea.” Myoume glanced at her. “Bachisu-san had a bond with Doryoku, right? She’s used to contact with a human being. Maybe she needs that to wake, too — a living pulse.”

“Meaning what, exactly?” Shishi looked wary, and Myoume smiled at her expression.

“Put the bracelet on, and then try.” She said softly, and Hikari was struck by the sudden glimmer in the Seishi’s indigo eyes.

“Myoume?” She murmured. “Are you with us?”

“I’m fine.” Myoume nodded. “I just have a hunch... that’s all.”

“Well, Myoume’s hunches are fine by me.” Shishi shrugged. “All right. I’ll give it a go.”

“Just do it quickly.” Aoiketsu begged. “I’m not watching, but even thinking about you rubbing some dead guy’s blood onto something that’s touching you is making me queasy.”

“Shut up, you wimp. Let me concentrate.” Was Shishi’s unsympathetic response, and as Hikari watched, she slid the black bangle onto her wrist, eyeing it for a moment, then shrugging her shoulders again.

“Jewellery’s not usually my thing, but I’ll make an exception for this.” She said lightly, as she carefully folded the cloth back into quarters, pressing the dried blood stain against the odd black shell.

This time, as the two elements made contact, there was a brief flicker of silver light, and Shishi let out an exclamation, dropping the cloth as she clutched her hand to her wrist.

“It moved!” She breathed. “I swear... like it was alive, it... it moved!”

“That light...” Hikari murmured. “Was that... Genbu?”

“Bachisu-san had the same colour light surround him when he used his power.” Shishi gathered herself. “I think... I think we’ve done it. I think it must be... Doryoku-sama?”

At the sound of her name, the silver light that danced around the bracelet grew stronger, spreading into darts of bright argent energy as little by little a being took form in the cavern before them. Hikari let out a gasp as the shape took on human form, and then, inch by inch as the image steadied, she could make out features in the woman’s face.

“Do... ryoku-sama.” Shishi whispered, and the figure turned, eying her in some surprise.

“You are the one Bachisu sent to me?” She asked softly, her voice gentle and sweet, and tinged with a distinctive Hokkan accent. “You are his envoy — the one in whom he has entrusted everything?”

“I... I guess I am.” For once Shishi was struck off guard, gazing up at the apparition in awe and wonder, and Hikari found herself scarcely any less struck, for the woman that now stood before them had something unreal yet divine in her bearing, an aura of silver light hazing against her skin as she gazed at them each with dark ebony eyes. Thick black hair was bound back from her face in an ornate braid, adorned with beads that had the appearance of tiny white pebbles or snowflakes against the dark waves. Her skin was as fair as the people of the north, though not as pale as the Meihi who had watched over her, and although her attire seemed little different from any other mountain woman, the distinctive curl of a snake and a turtle wound together across the bodice of her robe, marking out her connection to Hokkan’s God. There was something overtly serene and gentle in her demeanour, and despite herself, Hikari felt reassured.

“She’s not going to hurt us. Or go nuts. Or do whatever that Suiko did when she was raised by Kutou.” She told herself. “Maybe she really will help us... maybe.”

For a moment there was silence, as mage regarded bandit and bandit regarded mage. Then Doryoku reached out an ethereal hand, touching Shishi gently on the cheek.

“What is your name, friend of Bachisu?” She murmured, and Shishi started, staring at her uncertainly.

“Shishi.” She managed. “Shishi of Reikaku-zan. I... I’m pleased to... to meet you, Doryoku-sama. Bachisu-san told me... that you... might be able to help us, and...”

“Bachisu is dead.” Doryoku cut gently across her awkward words,

and to Hikari it looked like the mage had a brief flicker of genuine grief in her dark eyes. “Yet he has told me to trust everything to you. You are not Genbu’s, but Bachisu trusted you. So, Shishi of the South — I will trust you, if you in turn will trust yourself to me.”

“Can you help us find Genbu’s Shinzahou?” Aoiketsu asked quietly, and Doryoku started, staring at him in surprise.

“Who are you?” She asked curiously. “You glitter with Seiryuu’s magic, but you are not his chosen. Are you?”

“I’m just a soldier. Kaiga Aoiketsu. That’s all.” Aoiketsu coloured. “I’m not a Seishi. I’m just... me.”

“And you are also a friend of Bachisu’s?”

“No... Shishi is the one who knew Bachisu-san.” Hikari decided to take a hand. “But she and we... we all need your help, Doryoku-sama. We need to find Genbu’s Shinzahou in order to save the people of this world from disaster. Will you help us do that? *Can you?*”

“You are Suzaku’s Shinzahou.” Doryoku frowned. “And you...” She paused, gazing at Myoume, then nodding. “You are Byakko’s messenger. Bachisu’s message did not mention you to me. But these are allies of yours, Shishi? These people... are people who are your friends?”

“Yes.” Shishi nodded. “And Hiki’s right. We do need your help.”

Doryoku gazed at her for a moment. Then she smiled.

Bachisu sent a message to me, in the blood with which you woke me. “She murmured, running her fingers absently through Shishi’s wild mane of red hair as she did so.” Through his blood we were connected — through this medium he has spoken to me from beyond the grave. He’s told me that the one in whom he trusted everything was possessed of a lion’s spirit, and a true, good heart in which I could find both protection and security. That she would be my protector, and in return, I would help her in her errand. This is what he said, Shishi. Is this correct? Will you undertake the duty Bachisu has given you — to protect my relic and keep it in security? If you do, I will do what I can to help you find the Shinzahou. But once you have accepted, you cannot turn back. To guard the relic is a duty that ends only in death... are you prepared to undertake such a responsibility?”

“Guardian of the...” Hikari faltered, and Myoume frowned, her brows knitting at these words.

“Think before you answer, Shishi.” She said quietly. “If you agree,

it will be as she says. You'll find the Shinzahou, but Bachisu's asked more of you than just the removal of the relic from this place. Doryoku-sama's asking for your protection — a job that is normally given to a Seishi. Until there comes a time that another Genbu Seishi is reborn to take on the duty — you must be responsible for Genbu's relic and for ensuring nothing bad befalls it. The mages are powerful — think carefully before you accept her terms."

"But if I don't, we can't find the Shinzahou." Shishi said pragmatically. "And she doesn't seem like that much trouble. You don't come out of your relic like that all the time, do you? I mean, on your own like that, Doryoku-sama? It's just a case of protecting the relic itself — and that's not so hard. I can take it back to Reikaku-zan and there are lots of safe places there, in the heart of the mountain. It's no problem, right?"

"Without Genbu's Shinzahou, I cannot assume physical form for long periods of time." Doryoku shook her head. "My power was weakened by the actions of the demon, Tenkou. And I am not hostile. I do not seek battle. I seek Hokkan's protection... in Genbu's name."

"Well, my father is Suzaku's Tasuki, and I'm from Kounan." Shishi said matter of factly. "But if that doesn't bother you, it doesn't bother me. This errand of ours is to save all four countries, after all. Not just one. So it's for Hokkan as much as it is for Kounan."

"I should like very much to help you." Doryoku smiled, and Hikari was struck by how truly pretty the ethereal mage was. "Bachisu believed in you. You were good to him. And I have faith in his judgement. If he trusted you, Shishi, so do I."

"Then I guess we have a deal." Shishi grinned. "I'll look after your bracelet thing — when we go home, it can come to the mountain and that's where I intend to stay, anyway, so it won't be like anything will happen to it."

"You are sure?" Doryoku asked, and Shishi nodded.

"I'm sure." She agreed. "For Bachisu-san's sake, too. I don't want him to worry about anything, now he's gone to the next world. I want him to be safe now, and free and all of that. So it's fine. I'm not a child and I can do this. He had faith in me to — so I will."

"I'm glad." Doryoku dimpled, and she nodded her head, reaching out her ghostly, translucent hands to brush Shishi's own. As she did so, Shishi drew breath sharply, the silverish haze glittering briefly around both the bandit and the mage as the bracelet seemed to hum with energy. Then, just as soon as it had come, it was gone, and

Doryoku's form shimmered and disappeared into the black band that encircled Shishi's wrist. All of a sudden, the chamber that had moments before been lit up with divine silver light now seemed dull, and Shishi's left hand went to her right wrist, rubbing against the bracelet absently as she tried to catch her breath.

"Are you all right?" Hikari asked anxiously, and Shishi stretched out her hand, spreading and curling her fingers. Then she nodded.

"I'm fine." She said with a grin. "And we should get a move on. We've got the relic and we can go to Touran — right? Things are looking up — this time we have the advantage and we're *not* going to let Kutou get there first!"

At last he had reached Touran.

Maichu rode through the busy central street of the bustling northern capital, an ironic smile touching his lips as he realised how relieved he was to have finally left the South.

"Aoi's words have been bugging me more than I like." He reflected. "Am I getting superstitious in my old age? I hope not. Still, I haven't decided what to say to the Commander, or how to make my report to him at all. This whole mission's become hopelessly tangled... and I don't really know what that idiot boy is thinking, either. I don't know what he's got himself involved in. From the way he spoke... have the South rumbled him? Or have they not? It was like he was deliberately giving me mixed signals so I wouldn't be able to reason out what he was up to."

He sighed, pressing his toes gently against the horse's sides as he pushed onwards towards the inn that he knew his comrades would be using as their base. It would be good to be back among familiar faces at least, he reflected. Back to normal.

"Maichu!"

As he rode onto the forecourt, a voice called his name and he reined in his steed, glancing down at the speaker with a look of surprise in his dark eyes.

"Ouno?" He frowned. "Hey, have you been waiting for me, or something? I know I've been doing the Emperor's bidding, but a welcome party really isn't necessary."

"I was waiting, but not for you." Ouno shook his head impatiently, anxiety in his dark eyes. "Listen, Maichu. The Commander went up the mountain yesterday morning by himself. That Koku-zan mountain,

where that cave of bones was the first time we came. He left when the rest of us did. But he didn't come back."

"Didn't come...?" Maichu's eyes widened in alarm. "Shit, has anyone gone after him? What the hell are Kayu and the others doing — sitting around wailing about it?"

"Kayu said we shouldn't go there, and I think he's right." Ouno bit his lip. "Maichu, come inside, huh? Leave the horse to the grooms and come inside. Strange shit has been going on and this is the strangest thing yet. If I didn't know better I'd think something had put a curse on us for taking Sairou's relic and Shinzahou away from the West."

"Stop talking nonsense about curses, and get a hold of yourself." Maichu said bluntly, dismounting his horse and handing the reins to a waiting groom. "I'm tired. I've ridden hell-for-leather from Yukigase and I don't need your hysterics. Just tell me what's what, okay? Why has noone gone after the Commander, for one thing? If he's in trouble... that mountain's the kind of mountain that people might die on. Doesn't that bother you?"

"It's not a case of us thinking he's in danger." Ouno shook his head, ushering his confused friend into the building and through the hallway to the small parlour which had been commandeered by Seiryuu's people, a resolute looking Bouri standing at the door as if to prevent any intrusion. At the sight of Maichu, relief flickered in his expression, and Maichu eyed him doubtfully.

"Sentry duty?" He asked hesitantly, and Bouri shrugged.

"Things aren't right." He said frankly. "But at least you're here safely. That's something."

"Right." Maichu's brow furrowed, but he shrugged, allowing his edgy companion to lead him into the room, the door shutting behind him with a soft click as he turned to face the remaining members of Kutou's party.

They were not many, and immediately Maichu could sense the tension that cut through the chamber. By the window, hunched in her usual sulk, Suiko had her back to him, gazing out into the cold town streets as if watching for the Commander's return. In the far corner, an unfamiliar figure was examining her finger-nails in such a strange, predatory way that Maichu realised she must be Byakko's mage Kitora, and someone to be wary of if he valued his life. In the centre of the room, at the table sat the two remaining members of the party — an uncharacteristically troubled Jakou and a preoccupied looking Kayu.

At their entrance, Kayu was on his feet with an exclamation of surprise.

“Maichu!”

“Yeah, it’s me. Hold the fanfares, and all that.” Maichu said dryly. “What’s all of this about? I’m ushered in here, Ouno says the Commander’s missing — shit, what have you been up to since I went away? Aoi and I go South and you all fall apart! Why hasn’t anyone gone looking for Hyoushin-sama? If he’s really been missing since yesterday morning...”

“He isn’t missing.” Kayu said flatly. “And he’s not in danger. He’s just not here.”

Maichu frowned, noting the odd edge to his friend’s tones.

“Kayu?”

“Sit down, huh?” Kayu sighed. “And tell me at least that Aoi is safe and well in the South.”

“Well, he was when I saw him yesterday.” Something about Kayu’s demeanour put Maichu on his guard, as Aoiketsu’s words flashed through his thoughts once again. “He’s still shadowing the Southerners and they’re headed to Hokkan next. So he told me, anyway. But I need to make report to Hyoushin-sama about that. If he’s not in trouble, how come he isn’t here?”

“That’s something only the Commander knows.” Jakou said softly. “But like I said this morning, Kayu — the Commander’s the Commander and it ain’t our business ’less we have orders to make it to the contrary.”

“Kayu saw him.” Ouno murmured. “Jakou...”

“Saw him do what?” Maichu asked sharply, and Kayu shook his head, holding up his hands impatiently.

“We don’t know.” He said, and Maichu was aware of the troubled hesitation in his friend’s eyes. “We don’t know anything except that he’s not here, and that he’s... probably... not in trouble. At least... when Ouno and I left the mountain yesterday... he was definitely not in trouble.”

“Will someone please explain what the hell is going on?” Maichu demanded. “I feel like I’m getting scraps at the table here instead of a full course meal. Kayu, stop speaking in riddles and tell me straight. I’m not Aoi — I don’t like word puzzles. What’s happened to the Commander? What’s going on?”

“He was with a woman.” Ouno said softly, and Maichu’s eyes almost popped out of his head.

“A... *woman*?” He echoed, disbelief flooding his heart, and Kayu nodded.

“Yes.” He agreed slowly. “A Meihi woman. And... others of that tribe.”

“The Commander has a woman?” Maichu’s eyes widened in wonder. “Shit, I didn’t see that coming. So the old guy’s more of a player than he gives away, huh? And I thought he was all about work, but if he’s got a wench on the sly...”

“Shut up, you idiot, it’s not a joke!” Kayu snapped, and Maichu frowned.

“What’s wrong with it?” He demanded. “The Commander’s a man, ain’t he? Why can’t he have some action? He’s no different from any of us, even if he is tribal. An’ that’ll explain why he’s not here, if he hit it off with some local dame. There’s no need for all this cloak and dagger stuff. Sure, it’s not like him not to come back when he said he would, but even so...”

“Even so, Maichu, there’s what Toroki said to take into consideration.” Kayu said quietly, and Maichu groaned.

“Toroki, Toroki. It’s all frigging Toroki with you.” he muttered. “Look, if it makes you happy, I spoke to Aoi about that — and you shouldn’t have done, by the way, but since you did, he asked me all about it. Toroki’s never said that that guy — if there is a guy at all — is the Commander. There are hundreds of tribesmen in Kutou. You’re being crazy.”

“It’s not just Kayu.” Ouno shook his head. “I think it’s odd too. A bad omen. Something...”

“The Byakko prophet speaks the truth, you know.” The cat-like woman in the corner glanced up from her preening, shooting him a curious glance. “You’re Shi Maichu, huh? I see. You’re the one everyone’s been waiting for. I guess Eastern soldiers make slow riders.”

“I didn’t leave Kounan till yesterday.” Maichu returned neatly. “And you must be Kitora.”

“My name precedes me.” Kitora purred. “That’s right. And on the subject of Byakko’s people, I know more than anyone.”

She shrugged.

“Besides, that Hyoushin man is cold and he does not like the Beast Gods.” She added. “Why would he care what happened to the treasures? Kayu is not a fool. He is not prejudiced or blind enough not to see the true path of things. Humans are weak. They have failings... they falter and deceive. Even the strongest can fall at the right level of provocation. Your Commander is a ghost among men but he is still a human being. His heart can be won, his loyalty bought. Just like any other.”

“Not every man’s loyalty can be bought.” Maichu said stiffly. “And Hyoushin-sama’s one of those that can’t. When he comes back, he’ll set all this straight. You’ll see. He’ll have a reason... and you’ll all look crazy when he gives it.”

“If he can.” Kayu looked troubled, then he slipped his fingers into the folds of his cloak, pulling out a sealed scroll and setting it down on the table. At the sight of it Ouno gasped, and Jakou’s eyes widened.

“What the hell?” Maichu crossed the chamber, resting his hands on the wooden surface as he stared at the object in disbelief. “Kayu, what is that? What have you... what is...”

“A message from Kikei-sama, addressed to me.” Kayu said softly. “I haven’t opened it. I haven’t read it, yet. I... I’m waiting. Till the Commander returns.”

“Why?” Maichu rounded on him. “What do you think it contains?”

“It bears the Imperial seal.” Kayu met his gaze, and Maichu could see the flickering unease in the depths of his friend’s eyes. “Whatever it says, we’re all bound to obey it. No matter what orders it contains.”

Maichu’s eyes narrowed.

“Meaning?” He murmured.

“Meaning we wait for the Commander to return.” Kayu responded softly. “Until then, there’s nothing else we can do. There’s no one here to give us any orders to the contrary... for the time being, Maichu, it’s out of our hands.”

Chapter 18

Chapter Seventeen

“Well, you truly do not look like a man of Kutou’s army now, Lilaihi.”

As Hyoushin gazed at his reflection in the mirror, he heard the voice of the Genbu Seishi from behind him and he turned, a reticent look in his amethyst eyes as he met the older man’s gaze.

“This is truly to humour you, that is all.” He said softly. “What I am outside doesn’t change what I am on the inside... no matter how you dress me, my concerns will still be those of Kutou.”

“I’m not asking you to abandon your principles.” Bakaru scolded gently, coming to stand beside him. “I told you yesterday that I take your word as bond when you say you’ll use Genbu’s treasure only to pursue peace. But it’s not just for my sake, you know. Your sister... it’s for her, too. She loves you more than you may realise — she’s believed in you all this time. And though she won’t say it to you, it confuses her to see you dressed in the armour of those men who destroyed your village. For Lirayi’s sake, won’t you try a little harder to humour me? You shouldn’t suppress the Meihi that you were born. There’s no shame in it.”

“I have no shame for what I am.” Hyoushin shook his head, turning back to face the mirror. “But I am a soldier too, these days. And if it was not for the Emperor’s need and my sister’s heart I would not have let you convince me to do this. Already I have abandoned my post overnight — I do not belong in this village and my men will worry in my absence. If it wasn’t for the Shinzahou, Bakaru... but my hands are tied. You know you can manipulate me so long as you truly have the thing I seek — I can do nothing but bend to your will and hope you will reward me.”

“You have such a cynical outlook on the world.” Bakaru observed, and Hyoushin shrugged.

“It is not cynicism.” He responded. “It is just how I see it. There is no emphasis or slight intended. It is just the way it is.”

“Onii-chan!” Before Bakaru could respond, the door swung back to reveal his sister, her expression brightening as she took in his appearance. “You know, you look... like that, Nii-chan, in the light...”

you look like Father so much. I didn't know you would... but you do. You really... do."

"Like Father?" Despite himself Hyoushin was startled, turning back to the mirror as he gazed at his own reflection anew. He had seen his own face many times over the past twenty-five years, and had never seen anything more than himself staring flatly back, but this time, for the first time, he saw a shadow of something else in his features. Slowly he lifted his hand to his face, brushing his fingers absently against his scarred cheek as he realised his sister was right. A legacy of the brave, strong man who had stood and died for his family stared back at him, a hint of his father's resolution glinting through the clouded confusion of his own amethyst eyes. For a moment he just stood there, absorbing this irrefutable connection to his past. Then, as he did so, the image of a man cut down by Kutou's sword struck through him and he faltered, dropping his hand to his side.

"Father isn't here." He said softly. "I am thirty-five summers, Lirayi. Father died when he was only thirty-three. Therefore the comparison is a moot one — I am older now than he ever was able to be."

"That's not the point." Lirayi scolded, and Hyoushin gazed at her in surprise as she came to slip her arms around his shoulders. Gently she touched his chin, eying him with a faint, wistful smile.

"To see Father in you makes me happy." She murmured. "Just as it does to see mother in me. They aren't gone, when they're with us like that... don't you feel that way? It's been a long time since they died... but so long as we're here, aren't they here with us, too?"

Hyoushin bit his lip, unable to respond as the image of his father's brutal death once more played through his thoughts. There was a moment of awkward silence, then Bakaru spoke, resting his hand lightly on Lirayi's shoulder.

"Your brother is not as much at peace as you are, Rayi." He said wisely. "He was six years older than you when all of this occurred. He had six years more understanding of what happened before him than you did at only four years old. And by your own account, he saw your parents killed in front of him. You must be patient and let him deal with his own memories. That he has come and acknowledged you is progress enough for now."

"Onii-chan?" Lirayi gazed up at him uncertainty, and Hyoushin gathered his wits, fighting for his composure and winning as he slowly nodded his head.

"I have not properly forgotten anything, or anyone." He said

evenly. "If I had, it would be easier... but I have not. All my memories remain... but they are difficult memories and I would rather not unearth them. I did not see my mother die, but her screams echo through me whenever someone speaks my true name. And my father's death is something I will never forget so long as I live... even if I do bear his features in my face, Rayi, all I see when I think of him is a blood-stained sword and a soldier standing over him. That is the memory I have."

Lirayi's eyes became big with dismay, and she hugged him tightly.

"But can't you remember other things?" She asked him softly, as he ran his fingers through her thick silver hair. "Nii-chan, you said you had a complete memory — what about all the happy times as a family? What about those?"

"My past is there, but tainted by a sheen of blood." Hyoushin said evenly. "Please, Rayi. I do not want to think about such things. That you are here — alive and safe — brings me joy and relief I never thought possible. I had long since given up on finding any of my family alive after so many years and I will never, ever let harm of that nature befall you again so long as there is breath in my body. But I cannot think of the others, yet. Don't make me. I did not come here, after all, to be driven mad by the people whose deaths still haunt me."

Lirayi cast Bakaru a troubled look, and Bakaru slowly shook his head.

"As I said, he is not ready." He said wisely. "We can dress him this way, and call him by his true name, but until he is ready, we cannot push him to accept his past. He loves you, Rayi. You will have to settle for that, for now. At least until he has discharged his debt to Kutou's Emperor."

Lirayi sighed.

"All right." She said, defeat in her expression. "I suppose that for now it's enough to just know you're alive, Onii-chan. And that when it's over — everything you're fighting for — you'll come back to find me. I don't know, yet, if I'm brave enough to go to Kutou again — I've settled with my past in a different way from you, I suppose, but I have my fears just as much as you. But... I don't like that you're leaving here again today. And that I won't see you, necessarily, for some time to come. So I promise to think it over and see if I can face my fears — if you promise to try and do the same with yours."

Hyoushin smiled slightly.

“I expect I will have little choice in the matter.” He said evenly. “The mind is like a box — it can only be stuffed so full of things before it overflows. For now, this will suffice. But I will come back here when my work is done. You have my word — I will.”

“Then that will have to do.” Lirayi said sadly, disentangling herself from him as she stood back against the wall. “Bakaru, take care of him. I know where you’re going, I think... and if I’m right, it’s not going to be an easy place for him to go. But... but take him, anyway. And... make sure you show him... everything. Not just... what he’s come here to find. All right?”

“Everything?” Hyoushin eyed Bakaru quizzically, and Bakaru smiled.

“I had already intended it.” He said evenly. “But we should make our move now, if you want to be reunited with your soldiers by sundown. It is not a particularly long walk, but you have still to descend the mountain to Touran, and it makes no sense to waste time.”

“I’m ready when you are.” Hyoushin nodded, smoothing down the thick fabric as he cast his reflection a final glance in the long, smoky mirror that had been cut from northern glass. A tribesman stared back, his hair knotted into a tail at the nape of his neck and fastened with a clasp carved from the wood of the mountain trees similar to those his father had once worked to earn a living in the northern territories of Kutou. He was clad in the traditional everyday outfit of a Meihi male, and as his fingers brushed against the fabric, he was once more reminded of the last time he had seen his sister, when he had carefully loosed her fingers from his sleeve. This robe was made from similar, wool-based fibres, embroidered with distinctive Meihi designs, and as he ran his finger over them, he recognised the character for ‘peace’. He paused, eying Bakaru quizzically, and Bakaru laughed.

“Lirayi made the outfit for you.” He said softly. “She guessed at the measurements, but they aren’t tight-fitting garments and her estimations are usually spot on. Well, I suppose she had the memory of both your father and your brother to work from, in the end. It helped her, you see, to believe that you would return to her, if she had something real to give to you when you did. I thought it appropriate for this trip — considering the nature of your mission. Words have great power, you know, in Meihi culture — the meaning of names especially.”

“So you said yesterday.” Hyoushin’s gaze darted to his sister, who offered him a self-conscious smile. “Your stitchwork is impressive,

little sister... you have indeed not wasted your time since you've been in the northern mountains. Mother would be proud that you crafted something like this."

Lirayi's eyes widened, and a faint glitter of hope flared in her expression.

"You spoke of Mother." She whispered. "Lilai-nii, there's hope for you yet."

"I suppose I did." Hyoushin looked surprised by his own admission. "I said it without thinking about it."

"Then that is a step towards healing." Bakarū said wisely. "Say your farewells, you two. I want to go now, while the village is still quiet."

Lirayi hesitated for a moment, and Hyoushin could see the glitter of tears in her soft violet gaze. Then she flung her arms around him, hugging him tightly and taking him off guard.

"Stay safe and come back to me alive." She whispered. "Promise me, Nii-chan, like you did the last time. Promise me and I know you'll come back."

She faltered, fumbling with something at her throat, and as she pulled it free, holding it out to him, Hyoushin registered what it was.

"Take this with you." Lirayi begged. "I carved it myself... if you carry it with you, maybe it'll help me protect you too, somehow."

Gently Hyoushin took the object from her, running his fingers gently over the skillfully carved and polished black-stone pendant. It hung on a chain woven from distinctive silver-gilded Meihi fibres, and as he eyed it more closely, he realised that the pendant itself was marked with an ornately engraved tribal character for 'hope'.

"I made it as soon as I learnt to carve things well enough to be traded at market." Lirayi explained, as he glanced at her. "I made lots of them, but that was the only one I ever made with the character from my name. I wanted... to make one for you, too. But I didn't... it was too difficult, in case you didn't come back. So... so I want you to take mine, Nii-chan. For luck. And I... I promise, by the time you come back, I'll have carved one with your character on, too."

"This is precious to you." Hyoushin murmured. "I can't take it, if it is so special."

"It's not as special to me as you are." Lirayi shook her head, pushing his fingers closed around the pendant as she sent him a sad smile. "So please. Take it. Wear it. Remember me. And come back

safely.”

Hyoushin sighed, closing his eyes briefly for a moment. Then he nodded.

“I promise.” He said softly. “Though I won’t forget. I couldn’t.”

Carefully he fastened the pendant around his throat, slipping it beneath the collar of warm fabric and out of sight.

“I... I will come back, Rayi. Now I’ve found you, I won’t lose you so easily. I promise.”

“Then it’s settled.” Lirayi gazed up at him. “I’ll say prayers for you, and for your Emperor. And wait for you to come back.”

“Do that.” Hyoushin agreed. “I trust it won’t be long before we meet again.”

“All right.” Bakaru smiled. “Then follow me, Lilaihi — the place we’re going to is this way, and we need to cross the village to get there. Rayi, I trust you to see to any problems that arise in my absence — this errand is of some importance, and I’d rather we weren’t disturbed.”

“Yes, Father.” Lirayi bowed her head towards him, as if suddenly giving him the formal distinction of her tribal elder, despite the casual nature of their earlier conversation. “As you wish.”

Bakaru grinned. Then he took Hyoushin by the arm, leading him out into the snow.

The passages that separated the Meihi homes from one another were quiet, with just a few individuals going about their daily tasks, but as Bakaru and his companion made their way towards the far edge of the village, Hyoushin was aware of the way they all paused to acknowledge their elder with greetings. Though he was a stranger in their midst, too, they included him in their warmth, spreading their hands to welcome him and almost without thinking, Hyoushin echoed the gesture, drawing broad smiles from the tribesfolk as he did so. Bakaru chuckled, slowly shaking his head.

“You are a puzzle.” He murmured, amused. “You are so defiantly Eastern in your dress and your speech, yet the moment you stop thinking so consciously about what you are doing, you revert to what you were once taught. Your parents must have been excellent at teaching their children to observe good manners, my friend, because even after all this time they are so strongly drummed into you that you cannot resist complying with custom.”

“When with the Meihi, do as they do.” Hyoushin said dryly. “Yes, I suppose it is strange. But as I said, I have not forgotten. I would... dearly like to forget a lot of things. But I have not. I have simply suppressed those thoughts by force of will. And I was born a Meihi... whatever I have become.”

“It would be easier for all of us to just forget.” Bakaru agreed gravely. “I don’t judge you for feeling that way. I’m sure there’s scarcely a slave in this world — whether freed or otherwise — who doesn’t wish he could erase some sections of his memory and move on without all the pain. But this world sends tests for all of us. Life is precious — you do remember that, don’t you? That the Meihi value it above all things. So we keep going — and it makes us stronger. What we can’t change... in the end... that’s all it can do.”

“When I was in bonds, many of my fellows tried to kill themselves.” Hyoushin recounted sadly. “But not my Meihi brethren. We did not. Not once. It was not our way. We did not choose death. If it came, we accepted it. But we did not look to embrace it. Life is hard, or it is easy. It is painful, or it is joyful. Sometimes it is nothing at all — just existence. But it is life. And we do not waste it. Because you cannot undo death.”

“As I said, you are still a Meihi at heart.” Bakaru clapped his hand down on Hyoushin’s shoulder. “You could have quoted that direct from some Meihi teaching, you know.”

“Mm.” Hyoushin shook his head. “A Meihi does not kill. I have killed.”

“So have I, my friend.” Bakaru told him softly, and Hyoushin stared at him.

“You?”

“Yes.” Bakaru nodded. “When I manifested Urumiya’s power — the one and only time I have ever done so — I used it to slay the man who kept us in bonds. It saved your sister and many others from death, but it was still a contradiction of the Meihi rule. Even so...”

“Even so... what?” Hyoushin arched his eyebrow.

“I was Genbu’s man, when I acted so.” Bakaru offered a rueful smile. “Like you, I’m more than simply the tribe I was born into. Genbu’s faith acts directly contrary to my own. Genbu’s wishes, needs, responsibilities are all alien to a Meihi. But I was still chosen to do this task. Just as to don the armour of Kutou is alien to your nature as a man of peace — a tribal son who should, by rights, loathe the Eastern

Army. We are more alike than you think... we both have other things pulling us in different directions.”

Hyoushin frowned for a moment, digesting this.

“I am grateful for you saving Lirayi.” He said quietly. “More so than I can express. It isn’t something I can ever repay you for... painful as it is to see her and know she has suffered — she is alive, and I... for the first time in twenty five years, I know that I am not alone. It’s never troubled me as such, to be devoid of Meihi company... I’ve shut that part of my life away. But I did not know how much I missed my family till the last time I passed through this place with my men on our way to the mountain peak. To see her... it is painful but it is also... happy.”

“One emotion often doesn’t come without the other.” Bakaru said wisely. “All right. Watch your feet here — there are steps down but they’re covered by snow and difficult to see. At the end of this pathway is an opening in the mountain and a cave that leads into the heart of Koku-zan itself. We need to follow it. Genbu’s Shinzahou is on a direct path through the mountain to a remote place just beyond it — far from Touran’s gaze.”

“I’m trusting you.” Hyoushin nodded. “As you wish.”

As they stepped into the cave opening, Hyoushin’s eyes widened with surprise as, instead of finding himself in a dark tunnel, he realised that the passageway was not only carefully and diligently smoothed out, but that the walls were set deep with glittering stone that shone almost like fireflies and lit their way forward. He faltered, turning to glance at Bakaru, and the older man smiled.

“You can’t tell me that you’re not familiar with this kind of thing.” He scolded. “At ten years old, you must have attended memorials, Lilaihi. Don’t tell me you never entered a place like this before, when you were living free in the East?”

At his words, Hyoushin bit his lip.

“This is a memorial chamber. Or the entrance leading towards one.” He said softly. “Isn’t it? This is... where you bury your dead. That’s why you wouldn’t bring me here unless I was cleansed and kitted out like this. Because the Meihi burial chambers are sacred to the tribe. That’s it, isn’t it? We’re going to walk through a mausoleum of dead souls to find this treasure of yours.”

“You’re smart.” Bakaru nodded. “It’s precisely that. But these are people you do not know, Hyoushin — and they all died free and at

peace. You needn't trouble yourself about them or their fate. Their souls are happy... this is not a sad place, after all."

"No." Hyoushin brushed his fingers absently against the wall. "It's a place of light. A shrine of souls. Hence the stones that mark the way."

He offered his companion a faint smile.

"I understand your fixation with my appearance." He added. "I am sorry for placing on it a more ulterior moment. It would have been disrespectful of me to walk through here dressed as a man of the Imperial Army. I see that now, and I apologise for jumping to conclusions."

"Well, I won't pretend I don't want to re-awaken your Meihi self." Bakaru admitted. "But the truth is what I said to Lirayi. You're not ready to embrace it all yet. And that's something only you can decide — if you ever do. I won't try and make you. But I want to trust you and your motives, Lilaihi. You are of my people. You are family to one I consider almost kin myself. I don't think I've made a bad decision — I'm a good judge of character, and despite your hesitations, you have a good and loyal heart. So I'll bring you to the place I keep Genbu's treasure. Because it does no good buried in a snowy mountain if there's someone, somewhere who might be freed because of it's help."

"That's why Genbu gave it to the Meihi." Hyoushin said wryly. "Because of all people, they understand what it is to have freedom."

"Perhaps so." Bakaru chuckled. "It's a thought, after all."

"I didn't think coming to Koku-zan would provide me with my answers." Hyoushin admitted, as they moved deeper into the mountain. "When we examined the cave at the peak, we didn't find any sign of the treasure there. But it was closer than we thought."

"The place where Genbu originally hid the treasure is a place tied up in Meihi legend." Bakaru responded. "You know the tale of Bali, I'm sure, and the traveller who lost his way."

"Indeed." Hyoushin agreed. "Though I didn't realise that this was the mountain from that story."

"So it is." Bakaru nodded. "Although whether or not Bali was real is still a matter for individual debate. However, it was that legend and the cave's connection to both us and Genbu that made me decide the treasure should be somewhere here still, even if that was no longer a secure place for it to be. I was the one who originally chose Bali's cave to seal the treasure, with the spirits of two of my Genbu brethren as guardians to prevent it falling into the wrong hands. The coming of

the next Miko was expected, due to the fact so much time had passed since the coming of Byakko no Miko to Sairou. The chances were that someone would come looking for our treasure this time — and so it was. But I was more concerned with my family — I had gone to seek the brother that the slavers stole from me when we were just little children. I had made a deal with Genbu that I would go to the East and he would entrust my duty to the souls of those passed — so long as one day I would return to reassume my duty. Taking the Shinzahou to Kutou would have been too dangerous — so I left it in that place.”

He smiled.

“This passage was naturally formed, and schooled into the burial chambers beyond by the people who came here with me when we first fled North. The Shinzahou was the reason I chose Koku-zan — it was close to the spiritual roots of my people as well as his. Many know that Genbu’s treasure travelled the lands after the raising of Suzaku and Seiryuu... but in the end, this was the place it returned to. It came back into my hands, and I once more resumed it’s guardianship. Many searched for it, Lilaihi — but I was the only one with the ability to find it, buried once more in Bali’s mountain.”

He gestured.

“On the furthestmost side of this peak is an old temple, once used by the Meihi to worship the mountain, but long since abandoned since our race moved to other lands. It is here that Genbu’s treasure is sealed. Noone would look in a Meihi place of prayer for Genbu’s artefact, after all.”

“No.” Hyoushin sent him a sidelong glance. “Just as they would not look for a warrior of the North in a man of the snow.”

“As you say.” Bakaru agreed. “Although I’m only half of Urumiya’s spirit, really. The other half was entrusted to my brother... whose fate remains unknown.”

“Seiryuu has much to answer for.” Hyoushin murmured. “It seems his people even offend those belonging to his brother Gods.”

“Kutou has always been a land wracked by many evils.” Bakaru responded. “That’s why Kutou’s legend was the last. But even now, it’s not over. Kutou’s people are not bad, but evil still pervades the land. Till that’s eradicated, the suffering will carry on.”

“Yes.” Hyoushin agreed soberly. “And that’s why I do what I do. To try and create a free Kutou, because it is my home, and the only land to which I belong.”

He frowned, running his hands against the carved images that dotted along the cavern wall.

“Bakaru, do you know whether the power of a Celestial Warrior can be passed from father to son?” He asked softly. Bakaru frowned.

“Why do you ask?”

“Because the son of one of Seiryuu’s serves in my regiment.” Hyoushin admitted. “I have all but raised the boy in ignorance, I confess, of his true heritage. But he is... not like his fellows. And his blood had the power to raise Seiryuu’s mage from her sleep. I wonder... about how much of his father’s power he has inherited. Or if it is even possible for him to inherit such power.”

“For Seiryuu, there are many questions.” Bakaru frowned. “The legend isn’t over. Am I right when I say that the souls of Seiryuu’s dead Seishi have not been reborn? The area we are going to visit is the plain haunted by the ghost of the wolf-man you sought the last time you were here... that’s why I thought of it.”

“I’m not spiritually cognisant of all of Seiryuu’s workings, but I believe you are correct.” Hyoushin agreed.

“And Seiryuu no Miko has left?”

“Yes.” Hyoushin nodded. “Although Suiko, Seiryuu’s mage did predict that when the four Shinzahou are assembled in one place, she would appear to us once again and be able to save Kutou.”

“So in the absence of his Chosen, Seiryuu has settled for one of Seishi blood instead?” Bakaru asked. Hyoushin shrugged.

“Is that possible?”

“These Gods control the world we live in. Anything is possible.” Bakaru smiled. “However we interpret it, that is the truth of it. But the Gods need people through whom to do their bidding. This soldier of yours, if he is the blood child of a Celestial Warrior, it seems likely that he has become chosen in his father’s stead. To play the role of Seishi even without being one... to ensure the completion of the legend.”

He shrugged.

“After all, if Seiryuu no Miko is returning to Kutou, it seems logical that someone must protect her.” He said softly. “If there are no Seishi — your comrade may well be the next best thing.”

“Yes.” Hyoushin’s eyes narrowed. “And the children of Suzaku’s

warriors? Their legend has completed. Are they, then, so blessed?"

"Why would they need to be?" Bakaru asked. "There is no need for Suzaku no Miko to return. What sense would it be for Suzaku to bestow power on people who don't need to use it?"

"Then you have partly solved my question, and partly not." Hyoushin sighed. "Because it seems one of Suzaku's children has some kind of power... some kind of sense which has made her noticed by a Byakko Seishi and a Seiryuu mage independantly of one another. What her nature or her power is, I do not know. But that she is somehow important — I have no doubt. And what you say makes sense. But I... do not know how to interpret it."

"She is an enemy to you?"

"So it would seem."

"I'm afraid I do not know anything about Suzaku's people." Bakaru admitted. "I'm sorry. I don't know how to advise you."

"It's all right." Hyoushin sighed. "I have taken steps myself to discover what I can. I'm sure that I will get to the bottom of it... with any luck, soon. And you are being helpful enough, in guiding me to the treasure Genbu gave you."

"It is not mine, but Hokkan's." Bakaru said simply. "And Hokkan has peace which I hope to spread to Kutou this way."

As they crossed though another archway, the older Meihi reached out to touch Hyoushin's sleeve, gesturing to the words above his head.

"In peace, to the heavens, a life trusted to the snow." Hyoushin read the carving carefully. Then he smiled slightly. "Yes. This is familiar territory. Will you require me to pray before we leave this place, Bakaru? We are very close to your dead kinsfolk now, and I do not wish to offend."

"No. It's all right." Bakaru shook his head. "But I do want you to see something in particular. I did promise Rayi, after all — I want to keep my word."

"What, exactly, did you promise?" Hyoushin eyed him warily, and Bakaru did not answer right away. Instead he crossed beneath the arch, moving across to the furthestmost wall as he scanned it for something specific. Then he nodded, turning and beckoning for his companion to join him. Suddenly uncertain, Hyoushin did as he was bidden, finding himself standing beneath the glittering light of a cluster of the same unusual stone as the older Meihi gestured to the

wall.

“This.” He said softly. “Is what Rayi wanted you to see.”

Hyoushin followed the sweep of his ally’s arm, his eyes widening in dismay as he realised what he was looking at. Carefully carved into the stone rock was a traditional Meihi image of memorial, and alongside it, in clear, concise lettering were a series of names. Above them was carved the name of the Meihi settlement that he had grown up in, and at the base were the characters for ‘maiden’ and ‘hope’ — the two symbols that made up his sister’s name.

“Lirayi did this.” He murmured, and Bakaru nodded.

“She did.” He agreed. “I brought her here, week after week, when the caves were first being prepared. She insisted... it was important for her. Even though she didn’t have any of you to bury here... that her family were remembered among the other dead. She’d only just lost Kaliri, after all. It was part of her healing, to say goodbye to her brother.”

“Kaliri.” Despite himself, tears pricked at Hyoushin’s eyes as his fingers touched the characters that made up his brother’s name. “I asked you to protect her, and you did... to your death, you did. Faithful to the end... I’m sorry for it. It was my duty, not yours... to protect you both was my duty.”

He closed his eyes, struggling to compose himself, but it was to no avail and for the first time in several years, tears of genuine grief rolled silently down his pale cheeks.

“I’m sorry, too.” Bakaru admitted. “I thought that it would upset you — and I think Rayi knew it would, too. But either way, you needed to see it. Your family are a painful memory, but they were still people. Forgetting them — pushing the memories away — it’s one way to deal with it, but to do so is to deny they lived. To cut them from your life is to give their existences no meaning. Rayi’s right, that you and she carry them with you — this is her way of expressing that. Open your eyes, Lilaihi. Your own name is here, too — even though she was sure you lived, she didn’t want you to be forgotten in case she was wrong.”

Hyoushin did as he was bidden, words beyond him as his gaze ran over the Meihi characters for ‘man’ and ‘peace’ that comprised his own name. The lines were slightly wobbly, he realised with a jolt, and as he touched them, Bakaru smiled.

“She did not want to believe you might be dead.” He explained.

“She felt that to write you on a memorial would be an admission that you could be — but she couldn’t consign your soul to nothing just in case. She cried a lot, when she carved it. Because you were the last hope she had that all of her family weren’t dead. Her father, her mother — she knew they were gone. She’d depended on Kaliri for strength, and he’d died defending her. There was only you left. And she wanted you to come to Hokkan so much... I’m glad that somehow her prayer was answered. Whether it was Seiryuu, Genbu or the Meihi faith itself that brought you here — I’m glad. For that fact alone I would have helped you, Lilaihi. For rewarding her hope and coming here after all those years apart.”

Hyoushin took a deep breath, reaching up to dash away the tears from his cheeks.

“I have not shed tears since the day my parents died.” He murmured. “Not like this. And it is stupid. There is nothing here but names... yet... in a place such as this, carved by Rayi’s hand... it holds... meaning somehow.”

He sighed, rubbing his temples.

“I am a coward who chooses to run away.” He added bitterly. “But for now I must continue to run. I have too much to do... even though what you say is true, I don’t... I can’t... focus on my own thoughts. I have a duty to complete, and I must... for my Emperor’s sake, I must get the Shinzahou and return to Kutou.”

“Then we should press on.” Bakaru said quietly. “The temple is still some tunnels away.”

Hyoushin placed his hand against the carving one last time, then, slowly, he nodded.

“I’m coming.” He said softly. “Lead the way.”

“It seems like we’ve been walking in circles forever.”

Hikari paused against the wall of the underground tunnel to catch her breath, fanning herself vigorously with her gloved hand as she did so. “This is nuts. We’re underneath a frozen mountain but I’m boiling hot... what’s going on? Did we fall into a volcano by mistake?”

“No, but we’ve been going at some pace for a while.” Myoume frowned. “Don’t take your gloves off, Hikari — even if you’re warm, it’s only because you’re not used to this much exercise. I don’t want you to catch a chill when you start to cool down.”

“So where exactly are we?” Hikari grimaced, casting Aoiketsu a glance. “You have the plan, Aoi — are we on course or... where are we headed?”

“We were on a direct course for Touran.” Aoiketsu responded, reaching down to pull the parchment from his belt as he carefully unrolled it on the cavern floor. “According to the plan Tamatama-san gave us, we should keep straight on here and we’ll reach the capital in about an hour or so’s time.”

“Another hour?” Hikari stared at him in disbelief. “I have to walk for another *hour*? Are you serious?”

“Fraid so.” Aoiketsu eyed her ruefully, nodding his head. “Look. It’s the only path to Touran itself. But once we’re there we can take a break and find an inn — and plot how to find the Shinzahou. It’s not so bad, Hikari. You can manage a little longer — right?”

“We shouldn’t be going to Touran.” Before Hikari could respond, Shishi spoke up, crouching down beside the map as she ran her finger absently along the worn edges of the old scroll. “Touran is a diversion. We don’t need to go there. It’s a waste of time.”

“A waste of...?” Aoiketsu stared at her. “What are you talking about, Shishi? Isn’t that where we’re going — Hokkan’s capital? Isn’t that where you all originally wanted me to guide you, when we began on this trek?”

“Yes, it was, but it’s not the right place.” Shishi gazed up at him earnestly, shrugging her shoulders. “If we go to Touran we’ll be wasting time. It’d be quicker to just cut through the mountain and head out the other side. More direct. We’ll save time.”

“Suddenly she’s the map expert.” Aoiketsu rolled his eyes. “Shishi, I know you’re good at navigating, but you don’t know Hokkan any better than any of the rest of us. I at least know Touran well enough to find us accomodation, and we’ll be on a direct course for Koku-zan’s peak, too. That was where Genbu’s treasure originally was — I thought that was our initial aim.”

“We can get to Koku-zan far more easily if we turn off here and go direct.” Shishi said calmly, tracing her finger across the plan as she indicated her route. “Aren’t you paying attention? We don’t need to go to Touran. You should unplug your ears and listen, Aoi — the Shinzahou isn’t in Touran. So we’ll waste time going there... won’t we?”

“Hang on a minute.” Myoume frowned, resting her hand on Shishi’s

shoulder, meeting her gaze with a thoughtful one of her own. “What do you mean, Shishi? Why are you so certain about this? None of us have said anything about the Shinzahou or a change in plans... why are you so sure that we should take a detour?”

“Because Doryoku told us to, you idiot.” Shishi looked impatient. “Aren’t you listening, either? She’s supposed to be guiding us to the treasure — right? What’s the point, then, in ignoring her guidance? I thought we were going to use her help — not just pretend it’s not there. Why else did we go to that cave to retrieve her, if we aren’t going to listen to what she has to say?”

“But Doryoku’s not said anything since we left the place Bachisusan concealed her.” Hikari looked confused. “She went into the bracelet and back to sleep — didn’t she?”

“Huh?” Shishi stared at her. “What do you mean, back to sleep? Doryoku told us where the Shinzahou was — it’s in an old temple on the far side of Koku-zan. We need to cut through the mountain to get there, and Touran is not on the direct route. What’s so difficult to understand about that? She was perfectly clear — why the hesitation?”

“Doryoku... said?” Myoume’s eyes narrowed. “I see. So it’s that way, is it?”

“What are you talking about?” Shishi was becoming impatient now. “Are we trusting her or aren’t we?”

“The thing is, Shishi, none of us heard Doryoku say anything about the Shinzahou or where it is.” Aoiketsu said slowly. “The last thing she said that any of us heard was that she was glad you’d accepted her terms. And then she disappeared. And that was that.”

“Aoi’s right.” Hikari nodded. “She said herself that she couldn’t rise up and have a proper physical form without the Shinzahou. I figured she was saving her strength till we called on her for help.”

Shishi opened her mouth to retort, then, as she registered the sincerity in her companion’s expressions she faltered, her eyes widening as colour drained from her face.

“You... can’t hear her?” She murmured, and Myoume shook her head.

“Not a word.” She said gravely. “Not even with my sight. Doryoku has been silent since we left the cave. At least, so it has seemed.”

“But...” Shishi faltered, glancing down at her right wrist as she

brushed her fingers gently against the black shell band. She raised her gaze.

“You truly didn’t hear her?”

“We didn’t.” Aoiketsu agreed. “But you did... which means...”

“Shishi accepted Doryoku’s terms, after all.” Myoume pursed her lips. “I guess that’s why.”

“But...” Shishi bit her lip, holding out her arm so it caught the light of the flickering torches.

“It’s changed.” She said softly. “The bracelet... it was loose when I first put it on, but now it’s like it’s clinging to my skin. Bachisu-san said that the circus people couldn’t forcibly remove it from him, either — like it was a part of him until he chose to remove it and conceal Doryoku somewhere safer. Do you... are you saying that... she’s bonded to *me* now? That it’s not just a case of protecting the relic, but that Doryoku is... somehow... *inside* me?”

“It looks like that.” Myoume agreed. “At least, she’s formed a connection to you in some way, Shishi. You’ve taken over Bachisu-san’s role. Didn’t you say that he had her from when he was a baby? Their rapport was different from the one Byakko’s Seishi shared with Kitora or, probably, that Seiryuu’s shared with Suiko, from what Aoi’s said. Doryoku’s used to human contact — she didn’t stir till you put the bracelet on. And Bachisu-san left her a message in his blood — is it too far fetched an idea to think that that’s how she’s doing it? The mages are woken by Seishi blood. It doesn’t seem such a leap to assume that Doryoku’s nature as a mage requires her to be directly bonded to that blood somehow. She struck me as a gentle spirit, after all.”

“But I’m not a Seishi.” Shishi objected, her eyes wide with dismay. “And I’m not even Genbu’s!”

“It doesn’t matter.” Myoume shook her head. “Bachisu-san — Urumiya — he chose you as his successor. Doryoku’s accepted you. And you are strong in your own right, Shishi. Your blood isn’t like your father’s, and I don’t think it’s like Aoi’s... but it probably still has elements of Suzaku in it. I can sense your connection to Tasuki the way I can feel Hikari’s to Tamahome, after all.”

She smiled.

“Don’t look so scared.” She added. “Doryoku’s taken to you — that’s all. I wouldn’t say she’s taken *over* you — but she’s not able to manifest physical form without the Shinzahou. Because of that, she’s

bonded herself to you like this and she can talk to you directly, through the relic on your wrist. Which means we're relying on you now to lead us to the Shinzahou, rather than Tamatama-san's maps or Aoi's navigation. She's decided to trust you because Bachisu-san trusted you — lets not waste that fact, huh?"

"Shit, what did I agree to?" Shishi clasped her hand around the bracelet, her expression troubled. She sighed, shaking her head.

"All right, I know, you're sorry you didn't tell me." She muttered. "Well, I guess it's done now. You could've warned me, but it's fine. We'll find the Shinzahou, and then you'll get your own body... right?"

"Shishi?" Hikari murmured hesitantly, and Shishi glanced up, shrugging her shoulders.

"So it's done. No point in complaining." She said lightly, though there was still a flicker of doubt in her bronze eyes. "And I think she does want to help us. Right now she's wailing in my ear because she thinks I'm cross with her — I think Myoume's right. She hasn't taken over me, she's just connected to me so that she can communicate. And I suppose I can deal with that. If it's the only way she can help us... I guess I can put up with voices in my head a little bit longer."

"Navigation is over to you, then." Aoiketsu shot her a smile. "Where do we go from here?"

Shishi frowned, glancing at the map, then nodding her head.

"Left, like I said." She responded. "It's not far from here. We've cut across a lot of the border-land and we're already well into the Hokkan side of the mountains. If we turn left here, there'll be an opening and a pathway down to the old stone temple. Doryoku says that she can feel the Shinzahou's power coming from within it. So I guess that's what we do."

"Are you *sure* you're okay with this?" Hikari eyed her friend anxiously, and Shishi offered her a rueful smile.

"What can I do about it?" She asked. "It's done. I'd rather you could hear her too, but at least one of us can. So at least we can find what we're looking for. She thinks it isn't far for us to walk — certainly not as far as Touran would be."

"Then lets do it." Myoume said pragmatically. "After you, Shishi-chan. Doryoku's a mage spirit, even if she is a confined one at the moment. So I'm sure she knows what she's talking about."

Shishi nodded her head, brushing her fingers once more over the

black bracelet and Hikari got the impression her friend could feel the prickle of Doryoku's spirit surging inside of it. She glanced at the passages in front of them, then set off across the chamber towards the left-hand one, a purposeful expression on her young face as she led the way through the narrow twist of stone towards the glint of sunlight that grew bigger and bigger the further they walked. As they got close to the cave's exit, Hikari felt a cool breeze rush by her, and she sighed, enjoying the fresh, cold feeling of the Hokkan wind.

"Air, and light, at last." She murmured. "I never thought I'd be so glad of either. Have we really gone all the way through the mountain and out the other side?"

"I think so." Aoiketsu nodded. "And Shishi seems to have locked on to where we're going, too. She said an old shrine — right? Do we think that it's that place — over there?"

He pointed, and Hikari followed his gaze, taking in the delapidated construction that stood precariously against the mountain's sheer, black rock face. As she looked, she realised that three of the buildings' walls had been constructed from hewn rock, but that the final wall was the mountain itself, and that it had been this alone that had kept it standing, for briars and tangleweeds twisted across the outside, indicating it's long time lack of use.

"Looks like a good bet to me." She agreed. "Shishi! Is that where we're heading!?"

"Yes." Shishi nodded, turning to face them. She frowned. "But it looks like we've got a problem, you guys. Doryoku says that someone's here. She says it's someone with Genbu's spirit — I think it must be Bachisu-san's brother. In which case..."

"We've come to the right place." Myoume reflected. "But if he's a proper guardian, he won't want to give up his treasure easily."

"You think he might fight over it?" Hikari looked apprehensive. "I don't want to fight another Celestial Warrior over a Shinzahou."

"But we have Doryoku." Shishi pointed out, holding up her arm as she did so. "She'll speak for us — right?"

"Hang on." Aoiketsu put a hand on her arm. "Let's not run into it. We don't know anything about this Bakaru person — whether he's good or bad or whether he's anything like his brother. Even Bachisu-san hadn't seen him in years — correct? We don't know if he's friend or foe. We should be careful."

"Aoi's right." Myoume nodded. "Remember, we just buried Bachisu-

san. If this Bakaru sees you have Doryoku's relic, Shishi, he might assume the worst and think that you were the one responsible for the man's death. We can't risk a hostile reaction — we need to know what we're facing before we charge in and start asking questions."

"We don't really have time not to ask questions." Hikari sighed. "Look. Even if we don't know about Bakaru — surely if he's connected to Bachisu-san and Doryoku — can't she tell us something about him? Shishi — what does she say? Anything?"

"Doryoku's bond was with Bachisu-san." Shishi said helplessly. "But she doesn't think Bakaru has an evil heart. She says that Genbu wouldn't have chosen him if that had been the case. Besides, he's a Meihi — right? The Meihi don't fight — right?"

"With a few notable exceptions." Myoume glanced at Aoiketsu, who frowned, shaking his head.

"Even so, not without just cause." He said softly.

"If it's that way, though..." Hikari hesitated, then she nodded. "Let me go first. Let me go speak to him."

"You?" Shishi stared at her as if she was crazy. "How will you defend yourself, if he does attack you?"

"I don't know." Hikari admitted. "But I'm fed up of always being the one shielded and protected. If I'm here to save this world, it's about time I did something about it, right? If this guy is a Meihi, and if he's not naturally violent, I doubt he'll turn on a young girl on her own just asking him for help. Maybe when he realises how important this is, he'll want to help. And then I can explain about his brother and Shishi and hopefully he'll help us. If Aoi goes charging in all guns blazing, it might be different. Aoi's a soldier, after all. I'm just a school-girl. What kind of threat can I pose to a Seishi?"

"It's a risk." Aoiketsu's lips thinned. "Hikari..."

"It seems as good a plan as any." Myoume cut across him, nodding her head. "You go, Hikari. We'll follow not too far behind. If you get into trouble, scream — we'll make sure nothing happens to you."

"Myoume?" Shishi cast the prophet an incredulous look, and Myoume shrugged.

"Hikari's right." She said simply. "So long as we keep protecting her, she can't develop any power of her own. She has to take a chance here and there. And if Doryoku doesn't think Bakaru is violent, I don't think this is a particularly big threat. As I said, we won't be far

behind. It'll be all right. Suzaku's watching over her, after all."

"But even so..." Aoiketsu faltered, and Hikari sighed.

"I can do this." She said impatiently. "Please, Aoi. Let me go. I'll just talk to him, that's all. Explain what's going on and see if he'll help us. I can't always be the useless member of the party. That's the reason I'm not strong enough to raise Suzaku — because I don't do enough myself. So it's time I did. This time — I want to. I promised Jin I'd do whatever I could to succeed in this task. And I... I mean to keep my word."

She hesitated, then loosed the *shinken* from her belt, holding it out to him.

"Take this." She added. "And if I'm in trouble, you can come defend me. But I... I want to go first, Aoi. Please — let me do that?"

Aoiketsu sighed, resting his hands on her shoulders, and Hikari bit her lip as she registered the look in his blue eyes. Then, slowly, he nodded.

"I understand." He said reluctantly, taking the *shinken* from her grip and glancing first at it, then back at her. "You have to do what you have to do, just like any of us. All right. But be careful. And do as Myoume said — scream if you need us. I'll be right behind you. And so will Hotohori-sama's sword."

"We all will." Shishi added. Hikari's eyes flickered with relief and she nodded, flashing them each a smile.

"Thank you." She said softly. "All right. I'll be back as soon as I can. Don't worry about me too much — I'll be all right."

With that she was gone across the snowy landscape, quelling her own misgivings as she approached the ramshackle brickstone building with her heart in her throat.

"Facing another Seishi in another shrine reminds me of Jin and Sairou far too much." She told herself grimly as she ran her fingers around the edges of the old, battered door, finally managing to pull it free enough to slip inside the cocoon-like chamber. "But the last time Jin got killed because he was protecting me. Because Suzaku took control of my body and made me act without thinking about it... Jin lost his life. So this time... Suzaku will protect me, and noone else is going to get killed. I'll get the Shinzahou myself, and that way noone will be hurt. And I won't have to feel... like *that*... ever again. Because... I don't think I could bear to see anyone else die on my account. It hurts too much. I won't allow it."

She glanced around her, stifling the urge to sneeze as she took in the dusty, dim surroundings. Faint cracks of light trickled in through the gaps in the brickwork and the clouded windows towards the building's aging ceiling, and she found that once her eyes acclimatised, she was able to see quite well. The chamber appeared to be abandoned, however, and she frowned, perching on an old wooden bench as she wondered where the Genbu Seishi was.

"Doryoku told Shishi he was here, but I don't see him." She murmured. "How is that... is there another way in? A passage I haven't seen? There must be... else otherwise how could he have left without us seeing him? Or maybe it's that he hasn't arrived yet. Doryoku didn't say exactly — or if she did, Shishi didn't elaborate. I wonder if this Bakaru is like his brother... I hope so. Bachisu-san sounded like a kind person. I hope Bakaru is one as well."

Almost as soon as this thought crossed her mind, she heard the sound of voices, and she faltered, getting slowly to her feet as she crept slowly in the direction of the sound. As she did so, she saw for the first time the second opening into the shrine, hidden in the darkness of the building's mountain wall, and as she inched closer she realised that the speakers were coming from deep within the peak itself. She frowned, her brows knitting together as she struggled to make out the words, but no matter how hard she tried, the sound was unfamiliar to her ears. It was gentle and lilting, and as she strained to hear, she realised there were two separate voices.

"So two people. Not just Bakaru." She murmured, biting her lip as she wondered if she had made a bad choice after all. "That could be tricky. I wonder who's with him. What kind of people live in a place like this, anyway? What kind of friends would a Genbu Seishi have in the cold Hokkan mountains?"

At that moment, the voices became even louder, and as she watched from her slightly concealed alcove, an older man with fair skin and silver hair stepped into the chamber, followed closely by another of similar colouring, but considerably younger in age. At the sight of him, Hikari frowned, certain that she had seen his face somewhere before. However, from the odd nature of his attire and the distinctive pattern of the fabric, she felt sure she must have made a mistake.

"But he's Meihi. They both are." She realised. "So that's all right. I guess it makes sense. Bakaru's a Meihi, right? So he belongs in a Meihi settlement. And this must be one of his companions. But the Meihi don't fight... so I'm safe enough. Thank God for that."

She closed her eyes, drawing on her composure as she prepared to make her presence known. Even as she did so, however, the older guy paused, turning to look in her direction. He said something to his companion in soft tones, and the younger man started, his gaze darting to the corner where Hikari had concealed herself with a strange, confused expression in his amethyst eyes. Hikari swallowed hard, realising that she had been foolish to think she could hide from one of Genbu's chosen.

"After all, I'm a Shinzahou. My aura must shout that I'm here for miles when it comes to someone like him." She muttered. "At least, if Chichiri or Myoume are anything to go by. I should get a clue — these people aren't like other folk that way."

Carefully she stepped out from the alcove, glancing at the two Meihi apprehensively for a moment, then, awkwardly, bowing her head towards them.

"I'm sorry. I'm trespassing." She said honestly. "But I... I hoped that... I might... have a chance to speak to you."

At the sound of her voice, the second of the two men stared at her, as if seeing her properly for the first time. His eyes widened in disbelief, then, in soft, incredulous tones he spoke.

"Sukunami Hikari." He murmured, and at the sound of her name, Hikari's head shot up, alarm flickering in her hazel gaze.

"How do you know my name?" She demanded, all pretence at manners forgotten as she stared at this stranger anew. "Who are you — what's going on?"

The older man's eyebrows raised as he glanced from his companion to the anxious young school girl. He said something in the soft, unfamiliar tongue, and the younger man inclined his head slightly, answering in the same language. Then his eyes narrowed, as he turned his gaze back on Suzaku's Shinzahou.

"You are all alone." He said quietly, and something in the calm, Eastern-tinged words struck through to Hikari's soul as with a jolt of alarm she realised who the stranger was. "I thought that Suzaku kept better care of his people than that, Hikari-san."

"H... H... Hyoushin?" She whispered, and the man's eyes narrowed. He inclined his head.

"Yes, you do remember our brief encounter as well as I do." He agreed evenly. "I won't pretend I'm surprised to meet you again, though perhaps disappointed... I had hoped to come here with the

minimum of fuss.”

“Minimum of...” Hikari faltered, then, “You mean you wanted to get away with the Shinzahou without killing somebody this time?”

As soon as the words were out of her mouth she regretted them, but much to her surprise, Hyoushin’s expression became clouded. He held out his hands.

“For the death of the bandit Jin, you have my sincere apologies.” He said quietly. “It was not an act carried out in the Emperor’s name, nor did I sanction it. Miramu is a rogue, and he kills with reckless abandon. Your friend’s life was not stolen by Seiryuu. It was taken by a Western assassin acting on his own impulses.”

“But you’ll still apologise for it?” Despite herself, Hikari was taken aback, the wind struck somewhat from her sails by this, and Hyoushin nodded.

“Kounan’s people are not my enemies.” He said quietly. “I was in charge of the party and the responsibility is mine.”

“Not your...” Hikari frowned, suddenly confused. “But you... you’re... I mean... you...”

“I have come seeking the Shinzahou of Genbu, just as you have.” Hyoushin agreed. “But even you must know that your country has no need of such things. Kounan is at peace. Kutou is not. That is the only reason we oppose one another — you make our task more difficult by insisting on getting in our way.”

“Enough of this.” At this juncture, the older man raised his hands, speaking in fluent, if Meihi-accented Chinese dialect. “Whatever the cause behind this discussion, it is irrelevant anyway. Nobody may take the Shinzahou from this place without my consent. I am it’s guardian, and I give it only as I see fit.”

He glanced at Hikari, a strange scrutiny in his amethyst eyes.

“You are not from these parts.” He murmured. “You have a different look about you. Are you truly from Kounan, child? You do not look as though you are.”

“I...” Hikari faltered, and Hyoushin’s expression became one of surprise.

“Not from Kounan?” He echoed. “Bakaru, this is the daughter of Tamahome — the girl of whom I spoke, when we were travelling here. This is Sukunami Hikari. Kounan’s talisman, or so it would seem.”

“How do you know that?” Hikari’s expression became suspicious, and then she remembered Aoiketsu’s earlier role as spy, and sighed, rubbing her temples. “Like it even matters where I come from anyway. I’m here for Kounan. And I don’t want to fight with you. I need to get the Shinzahou, because its the only thing I can do to help the people who’ve been kind to me since I came here. I don’t want to see them die... that’s all. I won’t give up, because Jin died for this and I won’t let him down, either.”

She turned to the Seishi, desperation flickering in her hazel eyes.

“Bakaru-san, I know I’m intruding.” She added. “But... I... Kounan... if you give this man the treasure, Kutou will use it for evil. This world is in danger — if you give the Shinzahou to Hyoushin, he’ll give it to his Emperor. And then... and then they’re one step closer to destroying everyone. Everything!”

“What are you talking about?” Hyoushin stared. “Nobody wants to destroy anything.”

“Then you’re being an idiot.” Hikari said frankly. “If you can’t see what’s right in front of your face.”

“There will be no arguing here.” Bakaru said mildly. “Delapidated as it is, this is still a Meihi place of worship, after all.”

He eyed Hikari keenly.

“Child, you are the daughter of Tamahome, Suzaku’s Celestial Warrior? Is this true?”

“Yes.” Hikari admitted reluctantly.

“And this is why you seek me out? You know that I am one half of Urumiya — might I ask you who sent you to me?”

“D... Doryoku.” Hikari murmured, and Bakaru’s eyes widened.

“*Doryoku*?” He echoed. “Genbu’s mage... brought you to me? My brother... is he then with you?”

“No.” Hikari shook her head. “I’m sorry, Bakaru-san. Bachisu-san... did... not... he isn’t...”

“He’s dead. I see.” Bakaru’s expression became sad. “I had thought as much, but when you said...”

“Suzaku has Genbu’s mage.” Hyoushin’s eyes narrowed. “I see. This is an interesting development. And one of which I was quite surprisingly unaware.”

“It’s none of your business.” Hikari snapped back. “She brought us here, and I came to speak to Bakaru-san. Not to you.”

Bakaru sighed.

“It’s too late.” He said softly. “I have already promised to give the Shinzahou to Kutou.”

“But...” Hikari faltered, and Bakaru smiled, reaching up to touch her gently on the cheek.

“For your benefit too, I think this is best.” He reflected. “You truly don’t have the look of a Southerner about you, my child. I think you will be far happier without the burden a Shinzahou can bring.”

“I know what burden a Shinzahou can bring.” Hikari said quietly. To her surprise, Bakaru’s smile widened.

“Yes. I know you do.” He agreed. “I can see it, shining through you. You already have that power in your possession, Hikari-san. You do not need the power of Genbu when you have the power of Suzaku already at your disposal. Besides, it is as my friend said. Your land is at peace. Kutou is not. If their legend is to complete again, they must take the four treasures and unite them in the Eastern land. Only then will Seiryuu no Miko appear to grant their freedom from civil war.”

“Seiryuu no Miko?” Hikari looked blank, then, “But she’s married... she’s not coming back to this world. She won’t care about doing that — and she can’t be a Miko any more. It’s crazy — and I don’t think Tetsuya-san would allow it, anyway. Besides, it’s not about a Miko — it’s about Kutou and their Shinzahou and...”

“And you will be going to Kutou, I imagine, at some point?” Bakaru asked her gently. Hikari faltered, staring at him in surprise.

“I... I don’t know.” She murmured. Bakaru nodded.

“Indeed, I think you will. I think you must.” He murmured. “I have faith, child, in Kutou finding peace. In the hands of a Meihi, I trust it will be used that way. For your benefit as well as his.”

“Hikari, are you all right?”

Before anyone could respond to his words, there was a voice from the back of the shrine, and Hikari turned, seeing Aoiketsu in the doorway, Hotohori’s *shinken* in his right hand. At the sight of him she sighed, shaking her head.

“I told you I could do this on my own!” She objected. “Aoi, go outside... it’s fine! I’m not in danger — I’m fine.”

“Hey, blame Shishi, not me.” Aoiketsu put his hands on his hips. “It was her who said that Doryoku sensed more than just you and Bakarusan in the temple. And I...”

He faltered, catching sight of his Commander and doing a double-take as he registered the man’s appearance. His eyes widened with first disbelief, then horror as he realised the combative nature of his own stance and he swallowed hard, taking a step backwards as he slowly lowered his sword. For a moment there was an awkward silence, then, slowly, Hyoushin raised an eyebrow, glancing from the unfortunate young soldier to Suzaku’s Shinzahou. He did not say a word, but Hikari could tell that his gaze spoke volumes to Aoiketsu, whose cheeks reddened slightly as he dropped his gaze.

“Go outside, Aoi.” She repeated. “Tell Shishi and the others not to worry.”

“No.” Hyoushin stepped forward. “Your young friend seems to be worried about you and since you are in the presence of a Commander of Kutou’s Imperial Guard, he is probably correct to feel so. His caution does him credit — you are fortunate to have such a diligent bodyguard.”

There was a faint question in his words, and out of the corner of her eye, Hikari saw Aoiketsu flinch.

“He bears a pretty sword.” Hyoushin added softly. “Dare I say... a blessed blade?”

“It’s mine.” Hikari said evenly. “My Emperor gave it to me. Because it’s Suzaku’s, and so am I.”

“I see.” Hyoushin’s eyes narrowed. Then he shrugged his shoulders, bowing his head in Aoiketsu’s direction.

“You have my assurances that I will not harm the girl.” He said quietly. “This place is a temple, after all. A shrine once used for worship by the Meihi. To draw a weapon here would be to offend those spirits that still linger. Therefore there is no danger.”

It was impossible for Aoiketsu to be any more discomfited, but he swallowed hard, taking another step back towards the door. There he faltered, seemingly uncertain as to what he should do, and Hikari bit her lip, wondering what he was thinking.

“He came charging in like the devil was about to attack me.” She realised. “But in doing so — what has he told Hyoushin about his involvement with us? Has he put himself in danger just because he wanted to keep me safe?”

Hyoushin eyed the soldier for a further moment, then he frowned, turning his gaze back on Hikari.

“I cannot let you take what Kutou needs.” He said quietly. “It would seem that Kounan has already claimed much that Kutou once owned.”

Hikari did not have to look at Aoiketsu this time to sense the uneasiness in his demeanour at this cryptic, pointed phrase. She frowned.

“Suzaku’s people don’t steal.” She said softly. “They ask for help, true, but they don’t take what isn’t theirs. We haven’t stolen anything from Kutou — that’s not what this is about!”

“Really?” Hyoushin’s expression became thoughtful. “I wonder about that. I too am not a thief by nature, Hikari-san. And yet, to summon Seiryuu no Miko, my Emperor has no choice but to borrow from other lands, since Seiryuu’s own Seishi are dead. To consign a land to constant civil strife — is that Kounan’s wish?”

“No.” Hikari faced him bravely, feeling the faint stir of Suzaku’s power inside of her as she hardened her resolve. “It’s not. It’s to protect this world — *all* of this world — from the bad things Kutou might do with the Shinzahou. Someone behind the throne — someone of *tribal* birth — betraying your Emperor and bringing him down to hell with all of his people. His people. Our people. Hokkan’s and Sairou’s, too. That is the truth of what will happen, if all the Shinzahou end up in Kutou. That’s the future of this world. I know, because I’ve seen it, and so has Toroki. It’s beyond doubt. If you give your Emperor the Shinzahou, he’s one step closer to being betrayed.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“Unless that’s what you want.” She added. “To drive him down that path.”

“Because I am a Meihi, I must be ready to betray him?” Hyoushin’s eyebrow twitched up at this, and his gaze darted fleetingly to the still silent Aoiketsu. “I see. Un-original thinking, but I suppose I cannot blame you for listening so naively to Toroki’s prediction. If that is what it is.”

He smiled humourlessly.

“Do you know what a Meihi is?” He asked quietly, and Hikari had the vaguest impression that his words were not just meant for her, but for the hesitant soldier who seemed to have completely lost all idea of why he was inside the shrine or what he was meant to be doing.

“Aside from a tribe name — do you understand what it means?”

“I...”

“He means that if a Meihi gives his word, it’s his bond till death.” Bakaru said evenly. “There is no such thing as betrayal among our people. Not even a word for it in our language. We are not so inclined. And Hikari-san, as I have said — my mind is already made up. Whether Doryoku brought you or not — I cannot help you. I have given my word and I will not retract it. I promised myself that I would only ever entrust the Shinzahou to Meihi hands... and I promised it into the hands of my companion. After all, he has ties with my people and my village that surpass anything else. He is Meihi, and so am I.”

He smiled at her crestfallen expression.

“Don’t look so distressed.” He murmured. “As I said, you will come to benefit from that decision, too. I have no doubt about that. You *will*, after all, be going to Kutou.”

“I...” Hikari frowned. Then she gritted her teeth, raising her gaze to meet Hyoushin’s.

“You won’t ever find Suzaku’s Shinzahou.” She said resolutely. “You won’t ever take that to Kutou, and you won’t ever assemble all four treasures together. I promise you that — and I can make promises that last, too. You won’t ever steal it away from Kounan. No matter what you do or where you look. You’ll *never* get it. And you’ll never make it work for you. I *won’t* let it happen.”

“I see.” Hyoushin pursed his lips, raising a hand to gesture in Aoiketsu’s direction.

“And your guardian here will protect you, I trust, in your quest to conceal your treasure from Kutou’s eyes?”

Aoiketsu shot his commander a mortified look, and despite her irritation at his interruption, Hikari felt sorry for him. She frowned, her brows knitting together.

“That’s up to him. Not me.” She said quietly. “He’s not my servant. He’s my friend.”

“What the hell is taking the two of you so damn long?”

Before either Aoiketsu or Hyoushin could respond to this highly ambiguous remark, Shishi appeared in the entrance of the shrine, Myoume not far behind her. At the sight of Hyoushin, Myoume’s eyes widened, and she faltered, glancing from the distressed Aoiketsu to the calm, impassive Commander.

“Hyoushin of Kutou.” She whispered, and the Meihi’s expression twitched into a faint, humourless smile.

“Toroki of the West.” He said, a slight irony in his tones. “We meet again, it seems. Perhaps you were right after all — our paths are fated to continue crossing in this manner.”

“Hyoushin of...?” Shishi stared, then she grimaced. “Shit. So that’s the problem. That stupid Meihi ghost has got in the way, huh?”

“Shishi, your manners suck.” At this Aoiketsu gathered his wits, shooting her a desperate look. “Shut up, huh? This place... we can’t fight in this place. Bakaru-san said so... it’s a holy place. That’s why... I can’t... with the *shinken*.”

“Bakaru has already agreed to give the Shinzahou to me.” Hyoushin added quietly. “I didn’t come here to fight with any of you. I didn’t come here with Suzaku’s people in mind at all. I am unarmed, and I will not fight against either women or children — I was not trained that way. There will be no conflict. Kounan should stop interfering so much in matters that concern Kutou — and only Kutou.”

“Kutou’s days are numbered so long as you carry on gathering trinkets for your Emperor.” Myoume said frankly. “You can ignore it if you like, but it’s still the truth of what’s coming. Your land will be swallowed up by darkness, and so will all of the others. Kounan is involved because they see things more clearly than the people of the East. There is only one way to save everything, and complying with Kintsusei-sama’s wishes is not it.”

Hyoushin eyed her for a moment. Then he shook his head.

“Regardless of what you say, I will not betray my Emperor.” He said quietly. “He has sent me here, and I will obey his instructions. This is not my decision to make. To act on my own will in a matter I do not understand would be treason. It is as simple as that. I have faith in the King who sent me here. I swore an oath to him of fealty and I will not break it.”

“Genbu no Shinzahou should only ever be used for peace.”

Shishi spoke quietly, but as she did so, Hikari caught sight of the strange flicker of silver fire in her friend’s eyes and she gasped, her hand flying to her mouth as she registered the odd aura of argent light that suddenly prickled and danced around the black band at the bandit’s wrist. “If Kutou wish to use it to cause harm, even if it is the Emperor’s order, it must be prevented. Genbu gave the Shinzahou to this world to protect Hokkan and the Hokkan-jin from harm. That is

my duty too. I will not stand back and allow that to be changed.”

“Shishi...?” Aoiketsu’s eyes widened with confusion, and Myoume cursed, grabbing him by the arm and pulling him back against the wall.

“That’s not Shishi. That’s Doryoku.” She murmured, and as Hikari heard her friend’s words, she felt her heart lurch in her throat.

“What are you talking about?” Hyoushin was clearly as puzzled as Aoiketsu had been, for he eyed Shishi as if she had gone mad. “What interest does a bandit from the South have in the people of the North?”

“I am not a bandit.” Shishi raised her gaze to his, her aura suddenly glittering with silver light, and as she did so, Hikari was sure she felt the mountain tremble faintly beneath their feet. “I am Genbu’s mage and protective spirit. I am Doryoku, and I have come here in the pursuit of Hokkan’s peace.”

“Do... ryoku?” Bakaru faltered, then he stepped forward, resting his hands on Shishi’s shoulders. “Doryoku-sama, to possess a child is not a fair technique. Does she even know what power you manifest, when you choose to do something like this? You were trusted to my brother — to a man of Seishi blood. Now he has passed, it is not right that you leech into another’s heart to do your bidding.”

“I do not wish to hurt her.” There was regret in Shishi’s tones, but as she listened, Hikari realised they were not Shishi’s at all, for the phrasing and tone were pitched far more like the mage spirit herself, and the words were edged with a Hokkan accent, rather than the redhead’s more familiar mountain drawl. “Shishi has been kind to me. She was kind to Bachisu, too. He was indebted to her and her family — and so he entrusted me to her, when he passed to the next world. She and her friends are here in peace, Bakaru. They seek only to prevent suffering — not to cause war. I have guided them here because I have seen into Shishi’s heart. I know the motives of the South are not to harm.”

She glanced up, her silver-tinged eyes meeting Hyoushin’s bewildered amethyst ones. Then,

“I do not know this man.” She added. “What trust do you place in him that makes you so sure he should take Genbu’s treasure?”

Bakaru was silent for a moment. Then,

“Lilaihi is as good to me as family is.” He said softly, and Hyoushin sent him a startled glance, as if even he had not expected this

explanation. “He is Meihi, and he is kin to one whose trust means a lot to me. You have seen into the bandit child’s heart, Doryoku-sama. I have seen into this man’s, and I know that his intentions are also in the pursuit of peace. To bring him here was a test in its own right — I wanted to see for myself who it was I brought through the passages to this place of prayer. I have faith in him and I do not believe he means to cause harm to Hokkan or to Kutou. He wishes only to bring Seiryuu no Miko to the East. In a land such as this, where there is peace and tranquility — we cannot deny such things to our neighbours simply because of the past.”

“But if the treasure goes to Kutou...” Hikari began, and Bakaru shook his head.

“As I’ve already told you, it must.” He said evenly. “You will go to Kutou yourself, soon enough. I think you must do so, if you are to achieve the ends you seek. The truth is, you are both coming to the same point but from different directions. As a Hokkan-jin, I can see this more clearly than you can. Peace is not governed by borders, and nor are enemies defined by nationality. Genbu no Shinzahou will go to the East. In the end, this is what must be.”

There was a moment of silence, then Shishi let out a heavy sigh.

“You are decided?” She asked softly, and Bakaru nodded.

“Quite decided.” He agreed. “I understand your coming, Doryoku, but you know as well as I do that in the end, it is my choice and no one else’s. Bachisu trusted you to this child, and I can see that you are already fond of her and determined to help her in her cause. That was his decision, and I will not try to interfere. If he sought to give Genbu’s power to Suzaku, so be it. My choice is to give the Shinzahou of Okuda Takiko-sama to Lilaihi and trust it to his care. So long as the treasure is in Meihi hands, it will not be used for ill. You knew my brother and you understand the way of my tribe. This is my choice, and I make it freely and without threat or coercion. The Shinzahou goes to Kutou.”

“Then there’s nothing to be done about it.” Shishi held up her hands. “If this is your choice, Urumiya.”

“I’m not Urumiya when my brother no longer lives.” Bakaru said regretfully. “But I thank you anyway, Doryoku-sama. You will see, I think, that the choice I’ve made is the right one. Please, take your young friends and leave this place. The precise location of the treasure is a secret I do not wish to reveal.”

“All right.” Shishi nodded, and Hikari’s eyes widened in dismay.

“We’re giving up?” She demanded. “Shishi... Doryoku... *whoever* you are, you’re just going to let him give the treasure to that guy?”

“It’s his choice to make.” Shishi shook her head. “We can’t do anything to change that. Seishi should not be influenced by force. This is his will. I will not interfere.”

She spread her hands, and behind them, the stone-framed door of the shrine swung back on its hinges, revealing the cold snow beyond.

“We will leave.” She said softly. “As he has asked.”

“But...”

“Do as she says, Hikari.” Myoume said softly. “Doryoku’s controlling Shishi’s body and the sooner we do as she says, the sooner she’ll stop.”

“Shishi’s life is more important than the Shinzahou.” Aoiketsu agreed, his gaze flitting hesitantly to his Commander, then back to the schoolgirl as he sheathed his blade. “Come on, Hikari. Let’s do what he said and go.”

“You would say that.” Hikari pulled away from him. “But we can’t give up so easily. Not when Jin died for it... not when... *Shishi* wouldn’t give up so easily!”

“Stop it.” Myoume took her gently but firmly around the wrists, leading her towards the open entrance. “Don’t fight me. Just come. Aoi, bring Shishi. We’re some way from Touran here, and I don’t know what kind of effect Doryoku’s magic might have on her.”

Hikari tried to pull free, but it was to no avail, for the Seishi was both strong and determined and before she knew it they were all once more in the snowy terrain of the mountain landscape, Aoiketsu biting his lip ruefully as he cast a glance back towards the shrine.

“I’m in the shit now.” He reflected unnecessarily. “He must know that I’ve broken all kinds of orders... the way he looked at me... hell, but I didn’t expect him to be here of all places! And dressed like... Seiryuu only knows what that was!”

“Shishi, are you all right?” As the red-head sank to the ground, Myoume was quick to react, supporting the young girl as Shishi’s energy drained out of her. “Can you speak to me... are you okay?”

“Myoume?” Shishi blinked, focusing bleary bronze eyes on her companion’s face. “Shit, what did that mad witch *do* to me? One minute I was inside the shrine, the next... I was somewhere in space, or so it felt like.”

“You don’t remember what Doryoku said or did?” Hikari crouched beside her, sending her a worried look. “Bakaru-san said that she’d possessed you — you were speaking really funny, and then... you... you made us leave the shrine and the Shinzahou behind.”

“I did what?” Shishi looked horrified, and Myoume nodded.

“Bakaru made his choice, to give the Shinzahou to Hyoushin.” She said evenly. “Doryoku wasn’t willing to force the issue.”

“And nor were you.” Hikari sent Myoume a reproachful look. “I’m not cross with Shishi — she couldn’t help it. But you pulled us out of there too. And Aoi... Aoi, are you really on our side, or do you secretly not mind that your Commander’s got what he wanted?”

“I don’t mind either way.” Aoiketsu said honestly. “Because I don’t believe Hyoushin-sama will use it for evil, just like that old guy said. And you told them yourself that they can’t have Suzaku’s Shinzahou. That’s the Shinzahou I’m protecting — right? So long as you’re safe, nothing bad can happen in Kutou.”

“And I was worried about Shishi.” Myoume admitted. “I could feel her aura flickering and waning the longer Doryoku had control of her body. Shishi’s not a Seishi — I don’t know what kind of bond Doryoku had with Bachisu, but I don’t think that kind of drain on her strength is a good idea. Not for long periods. Shishi’s life is more important than any sacred necklace. That’s why I pulled us back. I promised Tasuki I’d not let anything happen to his daughter and I meant it.”

“I guess you’re right.” Hikari sighed, resting her hand on Shishi’s arm. “Are you able to stand up, Shishi? We’re a way from Touran, here — it’ll be a long walk, if we have to try and get there by nightfall.”

“I... I don’t know.” Shishi admitted. “Shit, Doryoku, you have some explaining to do. Show yourself, dammit, and explain — if you can! — just what you think you were doing!? Talking to me is one thing... but I did *not* give you permission to take over my whole body and use me as some divine puppet!”

At Shishi’s words, the bracelet around her wrist glimmered once more with silver light, and a hazy form of the mage appeared before them, her expression contrite as she bowed her head apologetically.

“I apologise.” She said softly, her dark eyes full of guilt. “I did not know it would be such a strain on you. I have never acted like that before, and I am sorry. It was not... my usual way of doing things, to rush in without thinking. But I wanted to help you. And now I’ve hurt

you — Shishi-chan, I'm sorry."

"It might not be like you, Doryoku-sama, but it's like *Shishi*." Aoiketsu mused. "Maybe you're channeling as much of her as she's channeling of you."

"Maybe so." Myoume looked thoughtful. "If Doryoku's bonded with Shishi somehow, I suppose that's possible. But either way, Doryoku-sama — you mustn't do that again. Shishi's not even fully grown yet, and she's not one of Suzaku's Celestial Warriors. She's not strong enough to stand your full power rushing through her and taking control of her body. I'm sure the strain would have been considerable even for Bachisu-san — but with Shishi it's madness. If it had continued, you'd have overwhelmed her completely and her own spirit would have been destroyed or displaced. Bachisu-san wouldn't have wanted you to do that — so please, act with more care."

"I am sorry." Doryoku bowed her head again. "Shishi-chan, please, forgive me."

Shishi sighed, gazing at the mage in resignation.

"I'm stuck with you now, though, aren't I?" She reflected. "Bachisu-san didn't just give me a trinket to guard, but a spirit to play with as well. That's right, isn't it? So long as I have your relic on my wrist like this, you'll babble in my ears and we'll be connected like this. And I can't take it off, because I've tried. So I'm stuck with you."

"I'm sorry." Doryoku repeated. "I should have explained more clearly, but with Bachisu dead I... I did not want to be abandoned on my own again."

She sighed, and Hikari was almost sure she saw the glitter of ethereal tears on the mage's cheeks.

"Bachisu was kind to me." She said softly. "And I did not like it, when we were separated. But I knew it was for my own good that we were. And he promised that when he could, he'd come back — or send someone he trusted with his entire heart and soul to find me, so I wouldn't be alone any more. I just... I don't want to be abandoned again. You're a kind person, Shishi. Bachisu trusted you and I've seen inside your heart, so I understand why. I'm sorry I'm such a burden to you. I don't want to be. I want to help you... but maybe I'm no use to you at all."

Shishi closed her eyes briefly, rubbing her temples.

"It's all right." She said finally. "I'll just have to get stronger some, won't I? But listen to me, okay? Don't take over my body again. I

won't abandon you — I'll take you back to Reikaku-zan with me, like I promised, and I won't lock you in some cold frozen cave somewhere where you never have anyone to talk to. But I don't like the idea of doing things I can't remember doing. This is my body — it's not shared, it's *mine*. You chose to give the Shinzahou to Kutou — fine, but it means you also chose not to have your own body. You stay inside the bracelet, and we'll talk when we need to talk. Is that understood?"

Doryoku stared at her for a moment. Then she smiled, nodding her head.

"I promise." She said sincerely. "Thank you, Shishi."

She reached out a ghostly hand, brushing her fingers against Shishi's cheek.

"And I will help you get stronger." She added. "I won't take over your body again, you have my word. But if I can, I will lend you my power. If you need it — I promise, it will be there."

With that the image flickered and faded, and the quartet were once more alone in the snow.

"I'm starting to see what you mean about the mages being more trouble than they're worth, Aoi." Hikari said ruefully. "I guess I understand why Chichiri and Tasuki have been in no hurry to raise Hisei from Reikaku-zan, if this is typical behaviour."

Aoiketsu shrugged.

"Compared with Suiko, Doryoku's an angel." He said wryly. "But what are we going to do now? Shishi's in no state to walk up or down a mountain... and even if there is a Meihi settlement near here somewhere, I... I don't really want to run into the Commander again anytime soon. I think I'm already in trouble enough without adding to his suspicions. If we can't get the Shinzahou, there's no reason for us to be in Hokkan. And so..."

"For now, Shishi's our number one priority." Myoume got to her feet. "I think I see smoke trails just over that rise, so it might be a village or a farm. We should try and head there, if Shishi can manage."

"Doryoku says there's a sheep farming settlement within fifteen minutes of here." Shishi nodded. "But I'm kinda wiped out — it sucks but I don't think I can walk anywhere right now."

She stifled a yawn.

“And you can pipe down too, Doryoku.” She added. “You’ve apologised enough already — now you’re just making my head ache.”

“How about Aoi and I go on ahead, then, and see if we can get someone to come help us?” Hikari suggested. “They might have a horse that Shishi could ride.”

“That’s a good idea.” Aoiketsu nodded. “Let’s do that. I don’t want to be hanging around here in case the Commander comes looking for me — and you’re probably the best one to watch over Shishi right now, Myoume. Let Hikari and I go to find help.”

“All right.” Myoume agreed. “I don’t think it’s too far that way. Be careful, all right?”

“We’ll be fine.” Hikari assured her. “Okay, Aoi. Let’s go.”

“So that was Sukunami Hikari.”

Back in the Meihi temple, Bakaru’s face had become thoughtful, as he eyed his companion keenly. “You call this child your enemy, Lilaihi — yet you are both acting on the same errand. You both seem to seek peace — why are you then at odds?”

“Because Kutou and Kounan fought a bloody war that has not yet faded from everyone’s memories.” Hyoushin said quietly. “Seiryuu’s Nakago killed Kounan’s Emperor Saihitei. In turn, Suzaku’s Tamahome slew Nakago. There is suspicion between our two lands. Besides, Kutou is the land which needs the power of the four Gods more than Kounan. Their errand confuses me. I do not seek to fight them... but they often leave me without a choice.”

“Hrm.” Bakaru’s eyes narrowed. Then he nodded.

“And the boy with her — he is known to you, isn’t he?”

“He is the other of whom I spoke. The descendant of Nakago, with the power of Seiryuu somehow in his blood.”

“Yet he was with Suzaku’s people?”

“On my order.” Hyoushin frowned. “I hope I did not make a mistake in so deploying him. He was instructed to infiltrate them — but it seems...”

He faltered, and Bakaru rested a hand on his arm.

“Your fight is not with Kounan.” He said quietly. “If Doryoku chose to help Suzaku’s people, then you should not consider them Kutou’s

enemy. Doryoku is as peaceful as was my brother and she spoke from the heart — she spoke true. That girl she has settled on as my brother's replacement has an honest soul, and her motives are good. I'm sure if you tried, your countries could reach an accord."

"Perhaps, in time. But for now my errand is particular." Hyoushin sighed. "And I am running out of time. That girl clearly has Suzaku's Shinzahou — from her own words, she knows the location of it and it will not be easy to find. I cannot waste any more time here, when that still lies ahead of us."

"Suzaku's Shinzahou..." Bakaru pursed his lips. "Did you not hear what else the girl said, Liliahi? When you mentioned Seiryuu no Miko — did you not hear her words?"

"Her words?" Hyoushin looked surprised, and Bakaru smiled.

"She acted as though she knew the Miko." He said softly. "But, correct me if I am wrong — is it not eighteen years or more since Seiryuu no Miko came to Kutou?"

"It is." Hyoushin's eyes widened as he digested this fact. "But Sukunami Hikari is..."

"A girl younger than the soldier who guards her. Perhaps fifteen — certainly no more than sixteen years in age." Bakaru nodded. "Do you understand the significance, Hyoushin? The girl is not from Kounan. Her spirit, her aura — it is not like those of her fellows, though she carries the will of the phoenix clear enough. She has something else about her — something which you need, more than anything in this world. More than you need this Shinzahou I hold, in fact. She has something else."

"She knows Seiryuu no Miko." Hyoushin whispered. "She is acquainted with the woman — and it sounded like she was *recently* acquainted with her. But Yui-sama returned to her world. She has not been back here... not once since that time. Which means... that that girl... Sukunami Hikari..."

"Is from the Miko's world." Bakaru nodded his head. "Yes. And there is only one clear reason why such a girl should appear in this place. Even with your limited faith in Seiryuu's magic, Liliahi, you must see that as clearly as I do."

Hyoushin bit his lip, nodding his head slowly.

"That girl is Seiryuu no Miko." He murmured. "And it is she — *not* Hongou Yui — who has been sent here to save Kutou."

Chapter 19

Chapter Eighteen

“You’re quiet.”

As they made their way towards the farming village, Aoiketsu cast his companion a glance, taking in her troubled expression with a frown of his own. “Hikari, are you really angry with me for interfering? Or is it Doryoku you’re cross with? Because something’s flickering in your eyes and I haven’t seen it there before. Something that the Commander or Bakaru said to you — it’s been there since we were inside the shrine, and...”

He faltered, and Hikari sighed, running her fingers through her thick dark hair.

“It’s Suzaku.” She said at length. “I’m the Shinzahou, remember? That was why I wanted to go alone this time. Suzaku rose inside of me when we faced Miramu in the Sairou shrine, and because of that, Jin got killed. I didn’t want anyone else in the line of fire this time... I didn’t know what was going to happen. But it’s confusing. As Hikari, I want to take care of Shishi and I’m more worried about her. But as the Shinzahou, my desire to protect Kounan is... stronger. And I don’t like that we just walked away. I’m glad there wasn’t a fight, but even so...”

“I’ve never seen Hyoushin-sama like that before.” Aoiketsu admitted. “Robed like that, speaking like that... about the Meihi, which is something he never does. It was... I don’t know how to explain it. Even what that man Bakaru called him — it was a word I never heard before. It was like... he was suddenly a stranger.”

Hikari hesitated, then,

“I think you’re right, though.” She said softly.

“About what?” Aoiketsu looked confused.

“You said that Hyoushin isn’t the tribal force threatening the throne of Kutou.” Hikari spread her hands. “Didn’t you? When Myoume suggested it — that was what you said. Right?”

“Yes.” Aoiketsu agreed. “Because I know the kind of man he is.”

“Well... I think... you’re right.” Hikari said carefully. “Before you

barged in on me, he recognised me by name. And he had a chance, if he'd wanted, to hurt me. Even unarmed — he could have done it. But he didn't. Even more, he actually apologised to me for Jin's death. He said it wasn't his order, but that he took responsibility anyway. It seemed a strange thing for him to say, and I half thought it was because he was with Bakaru-san. But... his eyes were sincere. I think... he meant it. I don't know how to explain it... but that was how it seemed."

"He did mean it." Aoiketsu nodded. "Hikari, whatever his faults and however you see his loyalties, Hyoushin-sama isn't a bad man. He's loyal to the Emperor and that's beyond question. And he has a very strong idea of life and death. He has fought and he has executed traitors on the Emperor's orders. But he has never gone looking for people to kill. And I know that he was cross about Jin's death, too, when he discovered what Miramu had done. He wasn't happy that one of Suzaku's people had been killed."

"It makes me confused." Hikari admitted with a heavy sigh. "If Myoume's wrong, and you're right — but Hyoushin is still our enemy. At least, *my* enemy. Because he's taken the Shinzahou and it'll go to Kutou... to whoever the real enemy is. He's obeying his King, because he's not a traitor. But by doing so... he's... maybe giving the real traitor the thing he wants."

"Yes, probably." Aoiketsu groaned. "I should have spoken, shouldn't I? I should have told him the truth there and then. But seeing him... it threw me off guard. And I didn't know how he would react. As it is, I think he suspects I've betrayed him — in whatever way, the things he said were cryptic but they meant... something. I'm pretty confused too, to be honest. I didn't like how that felt. And I... I did want him to take the treasure. I didn't want us to fight him. I... I just wanted to get away from there. I've sworn to protect you and I will... even if it kills me, I will. But Hyoushi-sama is... my Commander."

"He's more like your father, isn't he?" Hikari asked softly, and Aoiketsu stared at her, stopping as he absorbed the expression on her face. At his glance, Hikari smiled, shrugging her shoulders.

"The undertones in that chat in the cave were kind of like the chats my Dad and I have sometimes, when he's cross with me but trying not to yell." She admitted. "It seemed like a father scolding his son without coming out and saying so. That's all."

"Oh." Aoiketsu looked rueful. "To be honest, Hikari, I don't know what having a father is like — or a mother. So I'm not sure if that's

the right word. But from when I was five, I was his responsibility. So he is my guardian, in that respect. The one who raised me. It's not quite the same, considering he's my Commander and he trained me. Maybe mentor is a better word. But... since I never had a Father — I guess... he's the closest thing I ever did have. And it's not that he was... affectionate or anything like that, when I was a child. He was... as he is now. Logical, reasoned, calm and impassive. But... there was a trust in that impassiveness. In that detachment. It wasn't... that he was cold. It was... like he understood a lot of things, and stood back to let me learn them in the best way I could. That's the truth of it. I don't know whether to him I'm a soldier, a burden or whatever else. But to me he's... the person I look up to the most in the world. I guess... in that light... he is like my father."

"Yet you'll still choose me over him?" Hikari eyed him doubtfully. "Are you sure about that?"

Aoiketsu rubbed his temples.

"When you put it like that, it seems impossible to choose." He confessed. "But I guess that is what I've done, in the end. But it's not just... you. I mean, it is because of Kutou too. Still, even so..."

He sighed, reaching over to rest his hands on her shoulders as he turned her to face him full on.

"I'm in love with you." He said quietly. "You know that, because it's not the first time I've told you so. And you've darted away from it — I understand why you have. It's difficult, and we've so much to do. But even so — that's why I'm protecting you. Because you're Hikari — and I'm in love with you."

Hikari's eyes widened with dismay, and Aoiketsu frowned.

"What?" He murmured. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No..." Hikari gathered her wits, shaking her head. "No, it's just... that's what Jin said. That's what he said... before he... he died to defend me. And..."

She faltered.

"I didn't want Jin to die." She whispered. "I wasn't ever in love with him, Aoi. But I liked him a lot. And he said that — that to him I was Hikari, and that was why he wanted to protect me. Not because I was the Shinzahou. But because I was just... me."

"Jin again." Aoiketsu bit his lip, and Hikari eyed him quizzically.

"Aoi?"

“I’m sorry.” Aoiketsu looked sheepish. “I feel stupid, but I’m jealous of him. Of how close you were to him and how much you trusted him. Even though he’s dead — and even though you say you didn’t feel that way about him. He was still closer to you than I’ve been able to be — and I don’t like how it feels.”

“You’re jealous of Jin?” Hikari stared. “That’s crazy.”

“I know it is.” Aoiketsu nodded. “But it’s still how I feel. I’ve never been in love before, Hikari. Never. I told Maichu that it could wait until after Kutou was saved. I know I like girls — no matter how much I’m teased, I know what kind of a man I am or am not. But I’ve never fallen for anyone. I’m not like the other soldiers I live with, who’ll sneak off to taverns or flirt with a local city whore. I always thought it was just me being a proper soldier and focusing on my duty. But... I don’t know. Since I’ve been with you, my heart’s been all over the place. If Myoume’s right and we are connected — maybe that’s why I’ve never fallen in love before. Maybe I was waiting to come here and meet up with you.”

“That makes it sound like you don’t have a choice.” Hikari sighed. “That you have to fall in love with me, because Myoume said so.”

“It’s not like that.” Aoiketsu shook his head. “But it’s how I feel.”

He reached up to touch her cheek.

“What about you?” He asked softly. “How do *you* feel?”

“This isn’t my world. This isn’t my home.” Hikari said honestly. “And when this is over, I won’t be here. That bothers me. It’s what’s keeping me from giving in to my feelings most of all. I know Mother and Father went through hell to be together. I’m not as strong as they were, and I don’t know if I can make the sacrifices they did. And I don’t want to hurt you, either. In the end, it will be that way — because that’s who we both are. People from different worlds. Not just different countries on either side of a war divide, but... this is bigger than that. Seiryuu and Suzaku have thrown us together, but it’s temporary.”

Aoiketsu was silent for a moment. Then he nodded.

“As a soldier, you train not knowing when you begin a battle if you’ll see the end of it.” He said evenly. “It’s impossible to know what tomorrow will bring. Or a week’s time. Or even a year. You can’t plan that way. Tomorrow might be the end of the world — or it might not. But if you wait and see, you might... you might miss whatever there is. You know. While you’re waiting for something that isn’t.”

“I don’t even think I understood that.” Hikari blinked, and Aoiketsu laughed, shaking his head.

“It was a bit muddled.” He admitted, scratching his head ruefully. “I think what I’m trying to say, though, is that I know I’m in love with you now. Tomorrow, it might be different for both of us. Next week, next year — you may go home, and everything will change. But right now is just, well, now. And even if there’s no future, there’s this moment. And maybe, if we’re lucky, others too. I’m not afraid of being hurt, Hikari — but I don’t think I can live in this limbo any more. I’ll fight for you — defend you — I’ll do all those things. But I love you too, and I don’t want to have to suppress that. Because I don’t think... it’s the right thing to do.”

Hikari gazed at him in silence for a moment, and Aoiketsu was aware of the flickering emotion in her hazel eyes.

“Let’s let tomorrow deal with itself.” He suggested softly, cupping her face in his hands. “Because I’m only concerned right now with today.”

Hikari’s eyes widened, but she did not resist him, and carefully and self-consciously he kissed her, slipping his arms around her as he felt her heart beat against his chest. She did not pull away, and as they parted, she sighed, sinking back against him.

“I shouldn’t let you, but I wanted to.” She said softly. “It’s stupid, we can’t... but I... I want to.”

“Then it’s settled.” Aoiketsu told her gently. “No more fighting it. At least while you’re here, Hikari, I’m going to let myself be in love with you. And I’m going to defend you with that on my mind.”

“I... I suppose... that that’s all right.” Hikari raised her gaze to his. Then her eyes widened in dismay.

“Aoi, we’re in the middle of nowhere! We’re not supposed to be doing this — we’re meant to be getting help for Shishi!”

“Shit, so we are.” Aoiketsu looked rueful. “Maybe we shouldn’t go on errands alone together, what do you think?”

Despite herself, Hikari laughed.

“Definitely not. Not like this.” She agreed, although there was a sparkle in her hazel eyes. “Aoi... I don’t know what this is going to mean or where it’s going to lead. But I am in love with you. I think you know I was from not long after we met. And I think I... I do know who you really are, now. I wasn’t sure, before. But now... I think I do.”

And it's okay with me. The Aoi you are, I mean. He'll do."

"Good." Aoiketsu reached across to slip his hand into hers. "Then with that in mind, let's prove what a good team we are and go find help, okay? If we run, Myoume and Shishi'll never know we got distracted... and I think I can see the smoke trails Myoume was talking about. Come on — hold tight. We're about to find out how quickly you can move through soft Hokkan mountain snow!"

So Sukunami Hikari was Seiryuu no Miko.

As Hyoushin made his way slowly back towards the Touran inn, he found his mind returning to this fact time and time again. As he pictured the girl in his mind's eye, he frowned, remembering Suiko's advice

"You're looking for the wrong things among the wrong people. The one you're looking for isn't here."

"Is that what she meant?" He wondered. "That instead of Genbu no Shinzahu, we should have been seeking Seiryuu no Miko?"

He frowned, his hand going to the cloth bag that hung at his belt, alongside the long, carefully polished blade that he had once more donned when changing back into his Eastern attire. After the loose, comfortable warm robes of the Meihi, his armour almost felt awkward around his shoulders and he sighed, shaking his head as if to clear it.

"I did not expect to encounter my past in these mountains. Not like that." He admitted to himself as he reached the cave where he had tethered his horse. Unsurprisingly, he found that the animal was gone, and he paused, wondering whether any of his soldiers had come looking for him.

"Thieves or soldiers — I suppose I should be glad that the beast did not freeze to death up here." He reflected. "To leave such a sign of my passing is not my usual way, however — I have become unforgivably distracted since we crossed the Northern border. Still, thanks to Bakaru, I have Genbu's Shinzahu. And yet..."

He frowned, running his fingers against the wall of the cave.

"Aoiketsu." He murmured the name out loud. "With a sword in his grip that could only be the blade of the emperor Saihitei, from all our Kounan research. The blessed *shinken* of Suzaku's Hotohori... in the hands of Nakago's son. He seemed surprised to see me — uncomfortable, as if his being there was somehow of deeper meaning than it appeared. But just that he showed himself in the guise of a

soldier, not as a Kaiga exile indicates to me that somewhere his façade must have been broken. What begs the question is whether he broke it of his own will — and whether he is working for the South now. Or has he simply discovered what I am sure now is the truth — that Sukunami Hikari is the only one who can save Kutou? This is confusing. I must have time with which to think it through.”

He reached down to unhook the Emperor’s mirror from his belt, running his fingers over the glass as he sought to make contact with the Imperial Palace, but to his surprise and consternation the device remained cloudy, obscured by blackish fog and no matter what he did, he could not reach Kintsusei.

“This is not good.” He muttered. “Has Miramu already acted on his threat? But I have revealed his secret to noone. Although I did discuss it with Suiko — but this was something she already knew. Besides, if harm had befallen the Emperor, I’m sure that word would have spread. No. I must not panic. For some other reason I cannot make contact — perhaps because of the mountain altitude. I will wait until I am back at the inn — then I will be able to put things straight.”

To think was to act, and he set off down the mountain-side with renewed determination, half wondering if he would encounter his young rivals on his descent towards the capital. He saw noone, however, and as he entered the busy, bustling city, he found himself relieved to be once more among company, and no longer alone with his thoughts.

“If Seiryuu no Miko is Sukunami Hikari, why is she in Kounan and not Kutou?” He wondered as he slowly made his way through the streets and alleys towards the inn. “Why has she chosen this course of action — does she even know her reason for being here, or is it something else? She has Suzaku’s Shinzahu. Bakaru thought so, and from her own words it seemed pretty clear that she did. So she has a holy treasure and she seeks others — but to what end? To prevent destruction — what destruction? Surely she could only do that as Seiryuu’s priestess — she cannot be *Suzaku* no Miko. Can she? Is not that legend already at an end?”

“Hyoushin-sama!”

Maichu’s voice startled him back to himself as he stepped into the inn’s courtyard and as he registered the look on his young soldier’s face, he frowned, forcing all thought of Seiryuu out of his head as he crossed the cobbles towards him.

“You have arrived in safety.” He murmured. “That pleases me to

know, Maichu — I have awaited your return.”

“So have I yours, sir.” Maichu said frankly, and Hyoushin saw the concern in the boy’s dark eyes. “Kayu and the others said you didn’t come back yesterday and they’re in a flap about it. And there’s something else — Hyoushin-sama, Kayu has a letter from Kutou.”

“A letter?” Hyoushin looked startled. “To Kayu? From Kutou? To what end?”

“I don’t know. He was about to unseal it.” Maichu admitted. “I saw your approach and came out to meet you — I said you’d come back with some reason for last night and that it was probably none of their business, anyway. But whatever’s in this letter is probably important — and it has the Emperor’s seal, so you ought to know about it right away.”

“Yes. I must.” Hyoushin nodded. “As for my night’s absence, it was unfortunate but necessary.”

He patted the fabric bag.

“Genbu no Shinzahou has been retrieved.” He added. “But Maichu, from the expression on your face, there is more you wish to say to me — is there not? Words from Kounan, perhaps — from Aoiketsu?”

“Yes.” Maichu admitted. “I haven’t told Kayu or anyone else, because Aoi told me to only pass it on to you. And to be honest I... I don’t really know what to tell you myself, either. I don’t know what he’s doing, but he said he wouldn’t be making contact again. That he’s found something out — he didn’t say what — and that Kutou’s in really really deep shit if things carry on the way they are. He says that what he’s doing might look like treason, but he promised me it wasn’t and I believe in him — I don’t believe Aoi could turn traitor on the people he’s grown up with, after all. But he said there was only one way he could see to make sure the Emperor and Kutou and everything was saved. And that he was going to take it — even though it might mean him getting into trouble for it.”

“Aoiketsu.” Hyoushin’s eyes narrowed. “I see. Your words mean more to me than you might think they do. So the boy has uncovered something too dangerous to tell us, has he? Does he fear his companions in Kounan? Or is it that he is worried about us — about who the message might reach?”

“I think... it’s that, sir.” Maichu admitted. “But... Hyoushin-sama, Kayu told him about Toroki’s prediction. And he told me something else — that she’s mentioned my name again since then, in conjunction

with something or other. So Aoi wouldn't tell me anything specific because he was worried what would happen to me — even though I don't even know if I believe in that stuff. And... and he and I both agreed, sir, that whatever Toroki said — Kutou's tribal traitor isn't you."

Hyoushin's eyes opened wide with surprise at this. Then he offered the soldier a slight smile.

"You had a long conversation indeed." He murmured. "Thank you, Maichu. Your confidence gives me comfort... more than you know."

He sighed, his gaze flitting to the inn main building.

"I should attend to this message." He reflected. "Maichu, you have done well. Aoiketsu's lack of information is frustrating, but I'm beginning to think it is understandable. And for your own part, I am pleased to see you back among us."

Maichu frowned, then,

"Aoi told me one other thing." He said quietly. "He said he told me because he thought I should know it. He says he's Nakago's son — Hyoushin-sama, is that true?"

Hyoushin looked startled.

"How did he come by that information?" He wondered. "Toroki, perhaps?"

"He's wondered for a while who his father was... because of his blue eyes, as much as anything." Maichu replied. "But lately he's fixed on this — and he says that it must be, because his blood woke Suiko. Is... he right? Because he's worried... that the tribal traitor... might be him. That this is why he wouldn't tell me everything — why he said he might look like he was betraying his Emperor, and all of that. Because if he is Nakago's son, he has Hin blood. And... that's why."

"Then there is no sense further concealing it. Yes, Aoiketsu is Nakago's son." Hyoushin nodded. "But that does not make him a traitor by association. No, Maichu, I will not believe that unless I have good reason to do so. Your words have only strengthened the ideas I was already beginning to form regarding you're young friend's progress. But for now, it can wait. I must see what it is the Emperor has to say to Kayu — and whether there's anything for me to do about it. Run on ahead and tell your companions I will be with them shortly... just as soon as I have had a chance to catch my breath."

"Yes sir." Maichu saluted. "At once."

With that he was gone, and Hyoushin watched him disappear into the inn building, a sudden sense of forboding in his heart.

“Something is amiss.” He whispered, remembering the clouded mirror and the consternation in Maichu’s eager dark eyes. “Aoiketsu — Maichu — Kayu... Toroki’s prophesy and Kikei’s mirror. All these things... something in them is awry and I do not know what it is. All I know is that something has changed... and the sooner I discover what it is, the better.”

“Well? Is he coming?”

As Maichu re-entered the small inn solar, Kayu glanced up, an impatient look in his dark eyes. “Maichu, what took so long? You were ages — what were you saying to him?”

“The Commander has the Shinzahoo. That’s where he was last night.” Maichu said frankly, dropping down into a chair. “That’s what he was telling me. And he told me he’ll be here as soon as he’s caught his breath — his words. You took his horse from the mountain, after all — he’s had to walk it. It’s getting dark out there. He’s probably had a long slog of it through the snow.”

“He should have known better than to leave her there.” Ouno pointed out. “If we hadn’t done so, someone would have stolen her.”

“True enough.” Maichu sighed. “Or the poor thing would have died of exposure. But even so, give him a moment or two, huh?”

“Kayu has unsealed the letter, Maichu.” Jakou said quietly, and Maichu frowned, registering for the first time the dark unease that pervaded the room.

“Oh?” He murmured. “And read it too?”

“Yes.” Kayu bit his lip. “It... is... not easy to handle. But I... was the one it was sent to so... I will.”

“Boys playing power games, just as much as ever.” Kitora put in snidely from her corner, and Suiko cast her a dark glare.

“Shut up.” She ordered. “This is none of your business. This is Hyoushin’s business.”

“Not for much longer.” Kitora looked amused, and Suiko scowled.

“I said shut up.” She said warningly.

“Well? What is the commotion?”

Hyoushin pushed open the door at that moment, effectively stifling the prospective mage squabble and Kayu got apprehensively to his feet, the offending document clutched in his hand.

“Hyoushin-sama.” He said slowly, and the Meihi paused, eying the young soldier with an impassive, quizzical glance.

“Yes?” He murmured. “What ails you, Kayu? Something is amiss?”

“I... I’ve received a message from... Lord Kikei.” Kayu swallowed hard, shifting the scroll from one hand to the other as he eyed his Commander nervously. “And it... bears Kintsusei-sama’s mark, too.”

“A letter from the Emperor?” Hyoushin’s eyes narrowed. “Addressed to you?”

“No... well, it’s from Kikei-sama.” Kayu shook his head. “But it has the Emperor’s affirmation. His... his seal, Hyoushin-sama. He... it... I...”

He faltered, then shook his head.

“I’m sorry.” He murmured. “I don’t know what else to do, but he... it... it’s an order for your... for you to... relinquish your command. Of... of us.”

“*What?*” Maichu’s eyes almost fell out of his head, as he stared at Kayu in disbelief. “You’re not serious — that’s not possible!”

“It’s possible.” Kayu said soberly. “It’s what it says... in black and white.”

“I see.” Hyoushin’s expression became thoughtful, and he held out his hand. “May I see it for myself, please?”

“Y... yes sir.” Kayu nodded, passing the scroll forward, and Hyoushin took it, glancing at it. He frowned, running his gaze over the complex Chinese characters. Then his gaze reached the bottom of the sheet, and his amethyst eyes darkened as he recognised the Imperial seal. He glanced up.

“I cannot read Lord Kikei’s script.” He admitted. “But I recognise his Highness’s stamp. Maichu, will you come read this aloud for my benefit, please? I would like to know exactly what it is I am being ordered to do.”

“*Me?*” Maichu looked startled. “But my reading is... I mean I’m not...”

“Your reading is better than mine, or it should be after six years tuition at court alongside Aoiketsu.” Hyoushin interrupted softly. “And

I should like to hear the words from a man who I can trust to be completely honest. Please, Maichu, read Lord Kikei's command aloud."

Maichu hesitated for a moment, as out of the corner of his eye he saw Kayu visibly flinch at the implication in Hyoushin's words. Then he frowned, nodding his head.

"Yes, sir." He agreed soberly, sending Kayu a dark gaze as he crossed the floor and took the unrolled scroll from his Commander's grip. As he glanced at it, he realised that he was able to make out the Priest's words quite clearly, and as he understood what he was seeing, he realised that it was likely his Meihi Commander had understood more than he had indicated, too.

"Hyoushin-sama wants everyone to hear it in no uncertain, amended terms." He reasoned, as he re-read Kikei's brief, brusque message. "That fat old bastard Kikei — what the hell does he think he's about, sending a message like this!"

"Maichu, if you please." Hyoushin prompted quietly, and Maichu glanced up, indignation sparkling in his brown eyes at the temerity of the Priest's actions. However, somehow he kept a grip on his temper, instead beginning to read.

"On account of the recently received report, Hyoushin's position as Commander of the Imperial Guard is to be suspended forthwith pending further investigation." He said softly.

"Suspended forthwith." Hyoushin murmured the words softly. Then he nodded. "Is there more?"

"Yes, sir." Maichu's brows knitted together. "It seems that *someone* submitted a report to Kutou, sir, regarding you and your activity in the Northern territory. Kikei-sama seems to think — based on this report — that you're colluding with folk in the north. He mentions particularly a Meihi settlement on Koku-zan. And because of this — and your secret meetings with them — you are suspected of trying to betray the Emperor by negotiating with foreign interest and... and... plotting revenge against the Kutou crown for actions committed in Shoukitei-sama's reign against your... your kin."

A gasp went up from the assembled soldiers, and Kayu glanced down, biting his lip.

Maichu sent his fellow soldier another glower, then,

"That's all it says." He added. "I'm sorry, sir. It is signed by Lord Kikei and the Emperor's own seal."

“Yes. So it is.” Hyoushin was silent for a moment, and glancing at him, Maichu could not tell what was going through his mind. “Then there is little I can do, is there, but submit to the command.”

“Hyoushin-sama?” Maichu stared at him, and Hyoushin shook his head.

“I will not disobey a direct command from my Emperor, Maichu. You should know me better than that.” He said briskly. “Kayu, am I correct when I say you were the one who submitted the report to Lord Kikei?”

“I... I...” Kayu hesitated, then he sighed.

“Yes, sir.” He admitted.

“Will you tell me how it is you know of the settlement on Koku-zan?”

“I... we...” Kayu faltered, and Kitora snorted.

“They followed you like lost lambs and saw your treason for yourself.” She said disdainfully. “Your meeting with a woman, Hyoushin. Or will you deny it?”

“I haven’t denied meeting with my Meihi brethren, Kitora.” Hyoushin said coolly. “That in itself is not a sin.”

“Maichu said you had the Shinzahou.” Ouno murmured. “Is it... true?”

“Yes.” Hyoushin agreed. “On the Emperor’s behalf, I spoke to people who knew of its location. That, also, is not treason.”

“Hyoushin-sama, I... it’s not so simple as... this is the Emperor’s seal.” Kayu said, his tones troubled. “And yes, I did... spy on you. But it was on Kikei-sama’s request. I... I’m afraid I broke my promise to you and I told... I told Kikei-sama what Toroki said, when we were in Sairou. That she said the Emperor would be... by someone of tribal blood. And he... he asked me to... when I reported Aoiketsu’s news to the court, that when I returned to your side I was to... to keep an eye... on you, sir. I... I’m sorry, sir... but Kikei-sama... for the Emperor’s sake... he said I... I had to.”

“Ah.” Hyoushin’s clever eyes flickered with comprehension. “Yes. Toroki’s prophesy is problematic, isn’t it... I understand Kikei-sama’s concerns.”

He set the scroll aside, and for a moment, nothing in the chamber moved. Maichu glanced at him, intending to say something, but any

words that might have formed died unspoken as he caught sight of the man's expression. Though his face betrayed little in the way of emotion, there was a glint of ice cold rage stirring in the amethyst eyes, making him appear for the first time a truly formidable and frightening sight.

It seemed Kayu felt similarly intimidated by the sudden change in his Commander's expression, for he took a step backwards as if anticipating an attack.

At length, Hyoushin sighed.

"You think, then, that by meeting with my people on Koku-zan I have betrayed Kintsusei-sama — or that my doing so is imminent?" He asked softly, and Maichu flinched at the icy edge to the man's words. "Is that it, Kayu? Is that what you believe?"

"I... I don't know." Kayu admitted. "But... I... I don't understand why you hid it from us, that you were meeting with them, if the only reason was to find the Shinzahou. And... I don't want anything to happen to Kintsusei-sama. After all, Toroki... she said..."

"And what if the woman was bullshitting, Kayu?" Maichu exclaimed. "Prophet or not, she's working for the South — she could twist her visions to suit her politics — did you stop and think of that? Why would you believe the word of one Sairou dame over the man who trained you into the soldier you are, dammit? Hyoushin-sama's *not* a traitor — and I won't believe that the Emperor thinks he could be! It's stupid... and *you're* stupid, for believing it! And as for tattling tales to Lord Kikei... what the hell were you thinking?"

"Maichu." Hyoushin raised a hand, and Maichu subsided, anger still glittering in his dark eyes.

Slowly the Meihi shook his head.

"I will submit." He repeated. "For the order has come with my Emperor's seal. If that is his command, I must obey."

"Then you... you won't fight it?" Kayu asked hesitantly. "Commander, I'm sorry, but I..."

"You are doing what you believe is right." Hyoushin shook his head. "You should never apologise for obeying your Emperor's word... remember that, Kayu."

He offered the boy a flinty smile.

"I *am* Meihi." He added, and Maichu could hear the faintest of tribal inflections touch his Commander's usually nondescript accent.

“This cannot be avoided. If being so makes me a traitor, then that is a burden I will have to bear. I cannot deny that I am tribal born, or that it is my people who live on Koku-zan. I cannot deny that the Meihi’s origins are in Hokkan, or that I concealed from you my intentions when I visited the peak. It was not for reasons you would understand, and I shall not divulge them, although if it were my Emperor asking, I would gladly give him every detail that he sought. Still, the order does not require me to lay such things before you, and I will therefore make no excuses. I will also not deny that I have spoken to them, and that it is through them I have located this.”

He reached down to his belt, loosening the cloth bag and holding it up in front of him. “If that is collusion with the enemy, so be it. Evidently I am guilty.”

He set down the bag on the table.

“The Emperor may have need of this, even if he has no need of me.” He added evenly. “So I will entrust it to you, Kayu. Since you seem to be at the head of things here... Genbu no Shinzahoo should travel with you.”

“Hyoushin-sama...” Kayu hesitated, then he nodded. “Yes.”

“And your sword, Hyoushin, if you please.”

Kitora’s soft Western tones purred out from the corner of the room, and Hyoushin glanced up, his gaze becoming thoughtful as he surveyed the Sairou mage.

“Again, you speak out of turn.” He observed quietly. “Is this a matter in which *you* have jurisdiction, Kitora? I was under the impression I was facing Kutou’s judgement. You are not of Kutou.”

“But I am here, and I’m able to kill you from this distance.” Kitora replied neatly, flexing her claws as if to support her assertion. “Kayu, if you want, I can splinter that table and impale him where he stands. Then he’ll cause noone any further trouble.”

“No!” Suiko exclaimed. “You *can’t* kill Hyoushin!”

“Suiko?” Hyoushin shot the mage a startled look, and Suiko shook her head, resolution in her azure eyes.

“Hyoushin is mine. He’s Kutou’s. He’s not yours, dirty Byakko cat.” She said firmly, shifting so that she stood between Kitora and the bewildered Meihi. “If you hurt him, I’ll drown you — you know that’s what they do to unwanted kittens. They tie them in sacks and push them underwater. And I’ll do that to you, if you hurt Hyoushin.”

“Neither of you do anything, please!” Kayu begged, fear flickering in his gaze as he realised the two mages were gearing up for an all out battle. “The Emperor’s note doesn’t command us to kill him, Kitora. Or to return him to Kutou a prisoner. It simply says that he’s to be relieved of his command. If you’re not going to fight that, Hyoushin-sama, then there’s no reason to hurt you. But..Kitora is right. Please... your sword.”

“Yes. My sword.” A wry smile touched Hyoushin’s lips as he slipped his fingers around the hilt of his blade, pulling it from its scabbard as he dropped it with a clang on the table beside the Shinzahou. “There.”

“Hyoushin-sama — aren’t you going to argue your case at all?” Maichu demanded. “Why are you letting them do this... why?”

“I presume that I am not welcome back to Kutou’s court, on account of this report of yours, Kayu.” Hyoushin ignored Maichu’s question, meeting Kayu’s gaze with a cool one of his own, and despite himself, Kayu squirmed slightly in discomfort at the piercing question in the man’s eyes. “I am to be exiled and abandoned in the North — correct?”

“Why not? It’s where you belong.” Kitora lounged back against the wall of the building, idly scraping her nails against the polished wood of the beams. “You are a Meihi. Like you said. You can go and play with the other ghost people in their little snow village. I’m sure they’ll be more than happy to oblige you there.”

Hyoushin did not answer, but cold anger flared up once more in his amethyst gaze.

“I will not return, then, if I am not so summoned.” Was all he said, however. “As you say, my people have done well enough in the snow in the past. I am sure all will be well.”

“Hyoushin-sama...?” Maichu stared, as the Meihi made to leave the chamber, and as he did so, Hyoushin paused, meeting the soldier’s gaze.

“I would have Aoiketsu told of what has occurred, if you should be able to make contact with him in the South.” He said evenly. “So he does not come looking for me. I would not have him made an enemy of Kutou by his lack of information.”

Maichu’s eyes widened as he understood the unspoken message in the Commander’s look, and he nodded.

“Yes, sir.” He said quietly. “I’ll make sure of it.”

“Then there is just one more thing I must ask, before I withdraw.” Hyoushin cast Kayu one last look. “You have been trained with honour to serve an Emperor who does not believe in unnecessary death, Kayu. Therefore I feel I can ask this of you, and trust in your word should you choose to give it to me.”

“Hyoushin-sama?”

“I have surrendered my weapon and the Shinzahou without a struggle.” Hyoushin said levelly. “In doing so, I acknowledge that my involvement with the Meihi was all my own doing, and that it was I who sought their help, not they who reached out to me. They are not responsible for any harm or otherwise and should not fall under Kutou’s suspicion. Do you understand what I am asking of you? In return for my peaceful submission, I wish them to be left alone.”

Kayu frowned, and slowly he nodded his head.

“You have my word.” He said gravely. “The Meihi on Koku-zan will not be attacked... I’m sure the Emperor and Lord Kikei will agree to that. You’re right when you say Kintsusei-sama dislikes mass slaughter... besides, the message only told us what to do regarding you. I don’t want to try and make it more complicated. Even though we don’t have Genbu’s relic, I think we’ll likely return to Kutou anyway. You needn’t worry. Your people are safe enough.”

Hyoushin eyed him for a moment, then, slowly, he nodded his head.

“Thank you.” He said quietly. “That is all I seek.”

With that he was gone, the door swinging shut behind him, and as it did so, Kayu sank down in an empty seat, letting out his breath in a rush as he buried his head in his hands.

“You bastard, Kayu, *what* did you tell Kikei about Hyoushin-sama?” Maichu was on him in a moment, and Kayu glared up at him.

“*You* of all people should understand!” He exclaimed. “Toroki’s prediction — dammit, you were there!”

“Hyoushin-sama made us promise not to talk about it. I didn’t even tell Aoi, until I found that *you* already had.” Maichu snapped. “And you *also* went and told Kikei-sama and created all this hysteria? Is there anyone you *didn’t* tell this crazy, paranoid theory of yours? You’ve betrayed your Commander, based on what? Based on the report of someone who maybe tells the future but might just be reporting what the South want her to report? Kayu!”

“Kayu can only tell either Lord Kikei or the Emperor what he knows, Maichu.” Bouri said quietly. “Whether it’s pleasant or not, if a Lord of Court gives a soldier a precise instruction on the Emperor’s behalf, he has to obey it. Or would you put Hyoushin-sama on a higher level than Lord Kintsusei when it comes to matters such as this?”

“Hyoushin-sama has always existed to serve Lord Kintsusei, so it’s a moot point.” Maichu retorted. “If you stopped and thought about it for a damn minute, you’d know that. Kayu got his wires crossed and now Kikei’s scared the Emperor and all of this... do you not realise how important Hyoushin-sama is to Kutou’s army?”

“Maybe you *should* have killed him, Kayu.” Kitora reflected. “It seems his leaving alive might create dissenters.”

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” Maichu demanded, and Kitora shrugged.

“It’s entertainment in an otherwise boring day.” She said lazily. “Kutou is such a funny country... the petty squabbles of its people never fail to amuse me.”

She stretched, stifling a yawn.

“I’m bored now, though. I’m going to bed.” She said evenly. “Now he’s gone, the fun’s over. And there wasn’t even any blood... such a shame. But you have that stupid necklace, Kayu. The Priest will be happy with you, when you give him that.”

“Yes.” Kayu frowned, bending to scoop up the treasure. “I suppose so.”

“I suppose this means the Emperor has nominally put you in charge, Kayu.” Jakou reflected. “If so, what would you have us do?”

“Return to Kutou.” Kayu said frankly. “I don’t want to lead an army — I want to get home safely. We’ll go home... in the morning, we’ll go. I’ll take this and keep it safe with me.”

“And that’s it? Kick out the Commander and go to bed?” Maichu demanded. Kayu sighed, shaking his head.

“I’m sorry, Maichu.” He said frankly. “But he submitted. He more or less admitted his guilt. I don’t like it either, and I’m sorry I broke my word to him. But if it saves Kutou... I had to do what I had to do. That’s all. It wasn’t personal. It was...”

“It was cowardice.” Maichu said coldly. “You’ve always had that self-interested streak, and now you’ve brought it out for all to see.”

“I don’t think Kayu was acting in his own interests. You read the scroll yourself.” Jakou pointed out. “There’s nothing we can do. Even if it sucks — even if we do all like Hyoushin-sama. Even if he is innocent, dammit. The Emperor’s word is the Emperor’s word. To go against that is treason. You know that.”

“Yes.” Maichu sighed, rubbing his temples. “All right, already. I get it. It’s the Emperor’s seal. Fine. But I still think sneaking around behind the Commander’s back with secret reports was a low thing to do. Everything’s falling to pieces... but if it makes you happy not to ask questions, fine. I won’t bother to argue with you — I’m going to bed.”

With that he was gone, heading up the stairs to the tiny chamber that had been assigned him since they had arrived at the inn. He pushed back the heavy curtains, staring out at the snowy landscape as he pondered on what to do.

“Hyoushin-sama did give up.” He murmured. “He did submit his sword and the treasure. But... to *protect* the Meihi? Is that why he did it? I don’t understand. But that girl... the woman Kayu saw him with... is that why? The Commander has...a... *lover*? That somehow rings funny — but is that why he sought to deflect attention from them? Whoever she was, she must be more to him than just information on the Shinzahou. And he gave that up without a fight, too — almost as if it was no longer as important to him as it was when we first arrived. Was that for the Emperor’s sake? Or something else? I wish I understood what it meant.”

He groaned, clenching his fists.

“And dammit, *why* is the Emperor writing to *Kayu*, through Lord Kikei? If he wanted to dismiss Hyoushin-sama...”

He frowned, rubbing his temples.

“Kayu’s never been particularly high in the Emperor’s line of sight, *except* through Kikei-sama.” He muttered. “And Kikei-sama wrote that letter. It has the Imperial stamp — but who knows whether Kintsusei-sama was the one who stamped it. This seems fishy... even with Toroki’s prediction, I don’t understand why Kintsusei-sama would betray Hyoushin. Of all people, he’s the one man in Kutou I thought the Emperor would never doubt. And to just dismiss him like that. Almost as if... as if they wanted him unarmed and away from the rest of us so that he could be dealt with in private. Surely the Emperor would have recalled him to Kutou and made him face some kind of trial? He’s not unreasonable. Which means...”

He flopped back on his bed, staring up at the ceiling.

“Kintsusei-sama was coerced to stamp that message, or someone forged or borrowed his seal.” He murmured, his apprehension growing as he realised the direction in which his thoughts were heading. “And this is... Kikei-sama’s doing? Is he using Kayu as his puppet, to carry out some kind of personal vendetta to remove Hyoushin-sama? But why, dammit? Oh shit, Aoi, I wish you were here. This is beyond my brain — you understand court intricacies more than I do, and I’m sure I’m touching on the things you wouldn’t tell me — the trouble for Kutou that you wouldn’t fully confide. And then there’s the Commander’s message. Hell, when he looked at me like that — he *was* telling me to find you, wasn’t he? To tell you what had happened... he said so that you wouldn’t follow him, but I think... I wonder if he knows something more than I do on that count. Did you manage to get word to him before I got here? It seems impossible, but... it sounded like he thought you knew something. But now you said you were breaking ties with Kutou. And if I don’t know where you are, I don’t know what it was that’s so important.”

A knock at the door startled him, and he pulled himself into a sitting position, leaning up against the wall as he called the visitor in. The door swung open, and Maichu’s eyes widened in surprise as he registered the presence of Seiryuu’s mage.

“*Suiko-sama?*” He murmured. “But... what are you...?”

“Hyoushin’s sword.” The mage interrupted him, holding out the weapon, and Maichu stared at it as if he couldn’t believe his eyes.

“Why do *you* have that?” He demanded, and Suiko shook her head.

“I don’t.” She said frankly. “*You* do.”

And as if to prove her point, she dropped the weapon down on the floor beside him with a clatter. Maichu bent to pick it up, glancing at it, then back at the mage.

“You think he’s innocent too?” He asked softly. Suiko shrugged.

“I’m Seiryuu’s mage.” She said seriously, for the first time lacking the petulance in her tones. “I must protect Kutou.”

Maichu’s eyes narrowed, and he moved to shut the door, leading her inside.

“Tell me what you mean?” He murmured softly, and Suiko eyed him pensively.

“Your friend’s blood raised me from my sleep. Aoiketsu. The soldier

who throws up.” She said quietly. “His blood... Seiryuu’s blood. It isn’t strong — but it is Seiryuu’s, and so I’m here.”

“Aoi’s blood...?”

“I can’t explain.” Suiko shook her head. “But... my blood is tainted. Inferior... because Aoiketsu is not a Seishi. Kitora’s is twisted, because she was raised by Byakko’s rubbish. The mages are broken — we are not meant to fight this way. And Aoiketsu... his blood woke me. And it still exists within me. Aoiketsu... admires Hyoushin. Believes in him. So... Suiko does too.”

Maichu’s eyes widened.

“So because Aoi looks up to the Commander, you can’t betray him either?” He demanded. “It works like that — that you’re so attached to Hyoushin-sama because it was Aoi who allowed you to be woken, and Aoi sees him like a father? Is that why you take so much abuse from him? I thought you were crushing on him, or something!”

Suiko snorted.

“I’m a mage. I’m not a person.” She said disparagingly. “But I’m also smart, Maichu. Even if you don’t think so — I know that Hyoushin is the Emperor’s puppet. He will do whatever Kintsusei tells him — even die, if need be. And maybe he will die, if he doesn’t have that.”

She gestured to the sword.

“You believe in him.” She added. “And you know that removing him like that is just an excuse. The dark one... the shadow, Byakko’s refuse Miramu— he likes that kind of challenge, and he works for Kikei. I don’t like the Priest. He claims to love Seiryuu, but he lies. Even Hyoushin, who claims to love no God, is easier for a mage to trust in. I am afraid because Kutou is hurt... and I am weaker away from the Shinzahou than Kitora is, because I wasn’t raised by Seishi blood. I can’t protect Kutou on my own. Seiryuu will be disappointed in me, but I have to get help.”

Maichu sank back down on his bed.

“You want me to go after the Commander.” He deduced. “And tell him what you just told me about Kikei and Aoi and... that this is one big conspiracy. Don’t you?”

Suiko nodded.

“You are free to do so.” She said softly, and Maichu heard a note of wistfulness in her voice. “Kikei and Kintsusei-sama control my spirit

because they possess the Shinzahou and the scale. I cannot move away from them no matter how I try. But you can, Maichu. You are just a soldier. You can leave this place.”

Maichu frowned.

“You’re a little slow.” He said, his grasp tightening on the weapon as he made up his mind. “I’d already realised it was a sham, and I was already deciding to do something about it. At the very least, I need to take the Commander his sword. You’re right when you say he shouldn’t be without it — and he won’t go to the Meihi village, because if he did, he’d put them in danger. He must know that his dismissal is to mask the chance of a secret assassination attempt. He knows Miramu and if we’ve seen the possibility, he will have done. So it might not be easy to find him in a city which has several Meihi visitors from time to time. But you’re right — and I will go. Are Kayu and the others retiring for the night?”

“Yes.” Suiko nodded. “I waited till they were all gone, then I took the sword and came to you. Kayu is foolish. He took the Shinzahou, but not the weapon.”

She shrugged.

“Hyoushin would never be so foolish.” She added. “He is cold as ice, but he is a good Commander. Seiryuu likes him, and so do I.”

“Even though he doesn’t believe in Beast Gods?” Maichu eyed her keenly, and Suiko nodded.

“He believes in Kutou.” She said soberly. “Sometimes I think there is no one left who does. I am such a shadow of the mage I should have been, Maichu. It is pitiful when a divine spirit has to ask for mortal help. But I know I must. So don’t let me down, will you? Find the Meihi and find your friend, too. The one with the blue blood.”

“I guess I’ll be in a shitload of trouble when Kayu finds out I’ve run out on the Emperor’s message.” Maichu reflected, and Suiko cocked her head on one side, eying him thoughtfully.

“I don’t think that message came from Kintsusei-sama, and nor do you.” She said bluntly, and Maichu smiled ruefully.

“Very true.” He agreed. “I don’t. Which makes me worried for the Emperor’s safety. Toroki’s prediction bothers me a little too, Suiko — but even so, I don’t think Hyoushin-sama could...”

“Kikei-sama is a Hin.” Suiko said baldly, and Maichu froze, staring at her in disbelief.

“What did you say?”

“Kikei-sama is a Hin.” Suiko repeated obediently. “He is not a man of Seiryuu. I told you. He pretends to be. But he is not.”

“A Hin? Like Nakago? Like the Shougun?”

“No, not like Nakago.” Suiko shook her head. “Nakago was blessed by Seiryuu. Kikei has not been. He enters the shrine and he taints it.”

“How do you know that?” Maichu’s eyes narrowed, and Suiko smiled innocently.

“Each time his fingers touch holy water, it cries out to me of his greed and his deceit.” She said frankly, covering her ears as if she could hear screaming right at that moment. “It’s painful... his nasty, betraying Hin touch. He has blood on his hands, because I can scent it when he tries to clean them. I don’t mean blood of Byakko, but blood of his own people. He betrayed them first to save his own life, after all.”

“Does Hyoushin-sama know about this?”

“I don’t know.” Suiko shrugged, lowering her hands. “I just know Kikei is not someone Kutou should trust.”

“Even more reason for me to go after the Commander, then.” Maichu nodded his head resolutely. “Thank you, Suiko. And from the Commander, too. I’ll make sure he gets his blade — and I won’t let you down. We’ll find Aoi... at least, if he’s still alive, we will — and then... I guess we’ll find a way to help. Somehow. I won’t let you down.”

Chapter 20

Chapter Nineteen

“Are you all right now?”

Hikari slipped carefully through the flaps of the sturdy, tent-like construction, dropping down beside her friend as she cast Shishi a quizzical look. It was late in the evening and, after having sought help from local sheep farmers in the area, the four travellers had found themselves guests for the night, sheltering from the cold wind inside the surprisingly strong and wind-tight dwelling. The people had been kind, if strange in both apparel and custom, and although the tent smelt somewhat of sheep, it was still better than being out in the wintery chill.

At Hikari’s question, Shishi glanced up, offering her companion a rueful smile.

“I seem to be making a habit of this.” She said with a sigh. “Yeah. I’m fine now. Thankfully people in Hokkan are as kind as people in Sairou, though — I couldn’t have walked back to Yukigase tonight.”

“Well, I’ve been thinking about that.” Hikari owned. “What *are* we going to do, now? Doryoku made it clear that she wasn’t going to fight Bakaru’s decision. Has she said anything else to you?”

“Nope.” Shishi shook her head. She shrugged.

“To be honest I think she’s keeping a low profile.” She added. “Because she knows she hurt me earlier, she’s gone into a guilty panic and she’s barely said anything to me at all. From one extreme to another — although it’s nice to have a little quiet.”

She rubbed her temples.

“It’s a bit scary.” She owned. “Having someone else inside your head.”

“Myoume and Aoi are with the farm leaders, finding out whether there’s an easier path back towards either Touran or the border.” Hikari said gently. “So I guess we need to know which way we are going.”

“Well, there isn’t a point in us being in Hokkan, if we can’t get the Shinzahou.” Shishi leant back against the wooden tent support

pensively. "I'm still a bit pissed about that. About the fact she used me to stop you guys getting it. Although I know you couldn't have fought an old guy like that — but even so... Hyoushin has it. That means that Kutou have three treasures. And that means..."

"They'll come after me next." Hikari nodded soberly. "I know. But at least they don't know who I am, yet. And I'm not like a mirror or a necklace, Shishi. I'm not something that can be taken that easily."

"You mean that, don't you?" Shishi eyed her keenly, and Hikari looked self-conscious.

"Maybe it's not just you with someone else inside of you." She admitted. "But... it makes things difficult, doesn't? We've tried three times to get Shinzahou before Kutou. The first time, we were robbed. The second time, Jin got killed. And this time..."

She trailed off, and Shishi nodded her head.

"This time, I got way more than I bargained for." She admitted. "But the thing is, Hiki, I don't think Do-nee wants to hurt me. On the contrary, I think she's just really lonely and she doesn't want to be left behind again. So she wants to be useful to me... and it backfired somehow. That's what I think. She's not... scary. She's like Bachisu-san said. A gentle spirit. She doesn't want to fight. She just wants to make sure she does as Genbu asked her and keeps Hokkan safe."

"How can she do that, though, if she comes South to Kounan with you?"

"Bachisu-san told her to trust me." Shishi spread her hands. "So that's good enough for her."

She smiled ruefully.

"I bet Papa had no idea that, when he saved that guy's life seven years ago, it would have this kind of a consequence." She added. "I really am stuck with her, now. At least until I find a way to take this bracelet off. But I have a feeling... that won't be until we finish what we've set out to do. Because Do-nee wants to protect... and she needs me to do it."

"You're calling her Do-nee." Hikari realised. "You sound almost resigned to it, Shishi."

"Ain't nothing I can do about it." Shishi shrugged. "Thing is, Hiki, it ocured to me while Myoume and I were waitin' for you an' Aoi to come back with help. If we follow her take on the world — Myoume's, I mean — everythin' leads into somethin' else. Nothing is a

coincidence. Everything happens for a reason. An' if that's the case, well, I guess I just... found out what it is that makes me a part of all of this."

She sighed, glancing up at the roof of the tent.

"Myoume's Byakko's. You're Suzaku's. Aoi's Nakago's son, so that must make him Seiryuu's." She added softly. "Now, because of Bachisu-san, I... I guess I'm Genbu's. Because I have Doryoku."

Hikari's eyes widened.

"You think that was what was going to happen all along?" She demanded. "That you were going to meet Bachisu-san like this... even seven years ago? That that was why the Circus even came to Kounan then?"

"No..." Shishi frowned. "Not exactly. But I asked Myoume what she thought, and she agreed with me. And the catalyst... was you. Your coming here. Everything began to move when you appeared in the valley by Reikaku-zan. Myoume's visions all started to gain clarity an' stuff, then. She began to piece all the bits together into somethin' coherent, an' she was able to understand better what she was seeing."

"So... *I* did this to you?" Hikari looked troubled. "Am I really that important, that I can shift people's fates?"

"You're from the Miko's world." Shishi said simply. "The only people who have ever come here before you have been Miko, and they've changed countries permanently with their quests and their wishes. It ain't so crazy, when you think of it like that. Right? You're just the next one in the line to come an' alter the fate of this world."

"But Taiitsukun seemed pretty sure I *couldn't* be Suzaku no Miko." Hikari sighed, hugging her knees to her chest. "And if that's the case, what good am I?"

"I guess maybe a Shinzahou has its own power." Shishi shrugged. "I dunno. That kind of thing ain't my department."

She sighed heavily.

"It also... means that... Jin dying like he did was... even more important a factor." She murmured. "Because I think... I think that if all the other things I said are true, Jin was... meant to do that. He was... a guardian. A protector. His purpose in this was to come, fight for us, die for us... that was why he came. It wasn't a coincidence. It wasn't because I asked him to, or because he fell in love with you. It was because... Jin was chosen. By Suzaku. Somehow. And even

though he wasn't a Seishi, or anything like it — he was still Kounan's sacrifice. Because it was Suzaku, in the end, who asked him to die for us. And he... he answered the call."

There were tears on her lashes, and instinctively Hikari hugged her.

"It doesn't make it easier, though, thinking that, does it?" She murmured, and Shishi shook her head.

"No." She said heavily. "But Hiki, I... I'm really sure that he was there, with me, when that guy tried to kill me. That somehow it was him — that Suzaku sent him to protect me again, or he did it himself, because he didn't want me to get hurt. Doing Suzaku's bidding made him stronger — strong enough to still be watching over us, even now. And that... that *does* help, a little bit. If that's where he is... I know he's not so far away as I thought."

"Watching us?" Hikari pinkened as she remembered her conversation with Aoiketsu, and Shishi eyed her keenly.

"Hiki?"

"Do you really think he is? I mean, watching... everything we do?"

"Why?" Shishi raised an eyebrow, eying her friend suspiciously. "What have you done that you don't want him to know about?"

Hikari reddened, glancing at her hands, and Shishi's eyes narrowed.

"You and Aoi have been naughty, huh?" She asked softly. "How naughty is naughty, Hiki? Remember what I said — the four Gods like virgins for their games, and..."

"No! Nothing like that!" Hikari cut across her hurriedly, holding up her hands as she hastily shook her head. "I'm only fifteen, Shishi — I'm not ready for anything like that with anyone right now. It's not like that... believe me, it isn't. I just... he did... kiss me. And I... I guess I... let him."

Shishi pursed her lips, and for a moment there was silence between them. Then she shook her head.

"Jin understood all of that better than I did, really." She said at length. "Knowing, like Myoume said, that by dying he was removing himself from the equation. It's all right. I think he'd have understood."

"It's stupid, though." Hikari admitted. "I... I haven't ever felt like this about any guy before. Not ever. And I'm sure what Myoume said is something to do with it — that we're connected, so it makes our bond stronger. But it's not just that, though. I think I really have..."

fallen in love with him. And I don't... he says it doesn't matter, that I'll go back home. He said that it only matters that we're together right at the moment and we can worry about anything else when the time comes. But I... I guess I know that I already like him way too much for that it to be that easy. And I... I don't really know what to do about it. If we really are connected — is that just for the length of this mission? Or... is it more than that?"

"Like your mother and father?" Shishi asked softly, and Hikari shrugged her shoulders.

"It happened to them." She said helplessly. "But they went through a lot of hell to be together. And I'm not strong enough to do that. So I... I don't know, right now, what I've got myself into."

"It doesn't weird you out any, that this guy was sent here as a spy — and that he's the son of a guy your father stiffed out?"

"The spy part... no, because I trust him now and I know he is on our side." Hikari shook her head. "I have faith in him — so that's all right. The other thing..."

She shrugged.

"Aoi said himself that he's not his father and I'm not mine." She remembered. "And that, in war, people are killed. It's just how it is... it's nothing to do with us now."

"That's a very military way of viewing it." Shishi murmured, and Hikari nodded.

"Yeah, but Aoi is a soldier." She said with a shrug. "And the truth is, Shishi, that's what he's always been. Since he was a little kid, he's been trained and educated to make a difference somehow for Kutou. He's never had a proper family, only the military and that Hyoushin guy... so it makes sense, the way he thinks."

"Hyoushin." Shishi frowned. "The guy who has the Shinzahou. Are we going to go after him, then? I can't imagine Aoi'll raise a blade against him, if we do... though I'm sure I can make Do-nee track the treasure if need be."

"No." Hikari shook her head. "We're not going after him. I believe Aoi when he says that Hyoushin isn't the one who's behind all the trouble. Before you came into the temple, he apologised to me for Jin's death. I didn't ask him to, but he did — and he was sincere when he did it, too. I don't think he's our enemy. He's strange and he's distant and he seems completely oblivious to the danger of taking the Shinzahou to Kutou. But then, if Kutou haven't had the information

we've had... I think I'm starting to think about all of this a little differently."

"Because you're in love with Aoi?" Shishi challenged, and Hikari blushed.

"No, I don't think it's that... although hearing his stories about Kutou has made me think of them as victims rather than as antagonists." She admitted. "But it's more than that. It's more... what Myoume said, too, about Kintsusei-sama and him being desperate. Chichiri did say that war was created by a few evil individuals, not a whole country. I don't *think* Hyoushin is one of those individuals. But even so..."

"He's still going to take that necklace to Kutou." Shishi sighed. "And even if it isn't him, there's someone there who's going to try and use it for bad ends."

"How, though?" Hikari murmured. "This is what confuses me. How can they use the power of these things — and *why*? To destroy the stellar spirits? Is that really it? It's confusing and it doesn't make any sense."

"Kutou generally don't, but I see your point." Shishi nodded. "It's what Myoume said about borders not being important, I guess. Because you'd think that first on their agenda would be to invade the South again an' get revenge for eighteen years ago. It ain't like that, though. They seem to want to keep us out of it. We've got ourselves involved. That's the difference. They're avoidin' us when they can — like Miramu avoids Myoume."

"*He's* another problem altogether." Hikari rubbed her temples.

"Well, for tonight, we're here." Shishi said wisely. "I ain't moving till the morning, and hopefully they're goin' to feed us, because I'm starving hungry. Tomorrow, we'll move. If we're not going after Hyoushin, then we're going to go South, you think?"

Hikari was silent for a moment. Then she nodded.

"Bakaru-san was right." She said unwillingly. "We have to go to Kutou, sooner or later. I *have* to go there, if I'm going to find any way to raise Suzaku in all of this mess. I need the other Shinzahou to do it. Kutou don't have a Miko, so as long as they don't know I'm the Shinzahou, they can't unite the four treasures or do anything about it. Hyoushin seemed to think that Yui-san would come back to Kutou if the treasures were aligned, but that's crazy. You said the Mikos were virgins, right? Yui-san's married and they have a child. And that's the

same reason Mother can't come here any more, too. Their roles as Miko are over. So I think whoever is behind all this evil crap, it's the person who's spreading these stories about Seiryuu no Miko, in order to give the people around them false hope. And that being the case... we need to get there, raise Suzaku and put everything to rights. Don't we?"

"When you put it that way, I guess we do." Shishi agreed. "But you said south... you're not going to Kutou yet?"

"Right now, I'm not strong enough for that. None of us are. Not when Miramu might be in the equation." Hikari shook her head, resolution glittering in her hazel eyes. "You said yourself that you need to get stronger, to deal with Doryoku's attachment to you. She offered you her power — and maybe, if you *can* get stronger, you can find a way to use it. Myoume has power — we saw it for the first time properly when we were coming to rescue you, and she's not the kind of person you'd want to face in battle. Aoi's a strong fighter, and he's quick on his feet. We can rely on him for that. And I... if I can find a bit more of Suzaku's power, then I'll be strong enough to try and raise him properly — using what's inside of me it must be possible, if I had the other Shinzahou to help."

"So we'll go home, and consult Chichiri and Papa, huh?" Shishi's eyes flickered with comprehension, and Hikari nodded.

"That was my thought." She agreed. "I'd like them to come East with us, but I don't know if they can. Still, though, they're Suzaku's people. There's a lot they know that we don't... Chichiri especially. And if that's what we're going to do, Shishi — we need all the help we can get. I'm really determined now. I'm the only Shinzahou Suzaku has left... and I'm not going to be taken and used to destroy the whole of this world. We're going to go to Kutou and somehow we're going to fix everything. For Jin's sake, for Aoi's sake, for Meikyo and Eiju and everyone in Kounan — we're *not* going to let anyone do any harm to the ShijinTenchishou!"

It was getting colder.

As Maichu made his way carefully through the silent streets, he gritted his teeth against the bitter wind that whipped through him at intervals, pulling his cloak more tightly around him as he resolutely pushed forward towards the mountain path. At his waist, his Commander's sword clanked against the scabbard of his own at intervals, and somehow bearing the extra weight of the Meihi's weapon made him anxious, not secure. Hyoushin's sword was, after

all, different from all the other swords he had ever seen. Crafted especially for its left-handed owner, and gifted him by the Emperor, the hilt bore the carved form of Seiryuu winding his way angrily from tip to blade, and something about the Dragon's indignation set Maichu on edge.

"I wonder if Seiryuu is really pissed by all of this." He murmured with a sigh, as he passed through the Touran gate and on towards the dark outline of Koku-zan against the blackening sky. "Shit, now I sound like Ouno. But I guess I'm spooked. What Suiko said — that message — it's all messed up. And what the hell I'm doing... I don't even know. Am I a traitor, now? Or is it like Aoi said? What appears to be treason isn't, but it's hard to make out the difference? I wish I knew where he was, or that he was with me. He'd probably be able to tell me where the Commander was, too. Even though I'm sure he wouldn't go to the Meihi... where can he go, other than Koku-zan? He wouldn't stay in the city, and he doesn't feel the cold like the rest of us do. So... it has to be this path."

He sighed, setting his teeth against another brush of the biting wind.

"Shit, doesn't this country ever have a summer?" He muttered under his breath. "Even spring would be an improvement on this. Surely Hokkan's not *always* as frigging cold as this? Dammit, how do the people live, if it is? I couldn't do it."

He paused, assessing the path in front of him with a grim realisation.

"This path's damn dangerous in daylight, especially if it's frozen." He mused. "In the dark, without a torch flame, it's probably suicide. But even so, I promised Suiko — and dammit, if I don't find him and something happens to him... I can't let that happen. Hyoushin-sama's not a traitor to the Emperor. He's been set up. Kintsusei-sama never sent that message, and if that's so... it must be Kikei that's behind all of this. If Suiko's right and he really is a Hin... then he's tribal, too. Which makes it all make sense. It ain't Aoi. It ain't Hyoushin-sama. It's *Kikei* who's the Emperor's real enemy. And shit, now he's knocking off the people in his way. Hyoushin-sama's his scapegoat, because there ain't any hiding his tribal roots. Because of Toroki's prophesy, Kikei's found a way to get rid of the Commander, because he knows the Commander'd sooner swallow poison than let anything happen to Kintsusei-sama. Aoi's in the South, I've been there too — Hyoushin-sama said that he had faith in the two of us, didn't he? An' Kayu..."

His eyes darkened as he remembered Kayu's secret mission on the

Priest's behalf.

"Kayu's an idiot. A goddamn puppet." He decided, kicking out at a loose stone vehemently as he did so. "Kikei's done a few good things for him, so he's too stupid to see treason when it jumps up and bites him. But even so, to betray the Commander..."

He trailed off, as the pathway required all of his attention at that moment, and for a good twenty minutes he did nothing but focus on negotiating the awkward, icy scramble of rocks and ledges that created an increasingly sheer rise towards Koku-zan's peak. The moon was already high in the sky, and Maichu was sure that it was past midnight, but he ignored the exhaustion of his early morning ride and the events that had followed, redoubling his determination as he remembered the look the Commander had sent him before he left.

"He wanted me to find Aoi, but I'm going to find him first." He muttered. "Dammit, not all soldiers are so easily swayed from doing the right thing. Miramu was wrong. We ain't all sheep. I know what's right and I'll stick to it, even if it kills me. That's why I came to the capital in the first place, after all — to fight for what was right. Not to be manipulated by a greedy, fat priest."

His foot slipped against a patch of frozen snow at that moment, and it was all he could do not to cry out as he desperately reached out to steady his grip. At first it seemed to no avail, then the heavier, unusual sword of his Commander caught against a rock, halting his fall and allowing him to regain his balance. He grasped the sword in relief, eying it ruefully in the dark.

"I guess that's the favour returned." He murmured wryly. "I'm riskin' everything to find your master, ain't I? So you're goin' to help me get there, too."

He faltered, then shook his head as if to clear it.

"Shit, I'm talking to a sword." He muttered. "Does exposure make you go nuts, too?"

He released his grip on the carved sword hilt, taking a deep breath as he returned his attention to the pathway ahead. There was a cave not far on, he remembered, and as he did so, he recalled Ouno saying that this was where Hyoushin had tethered his horse when he had disappeared from the city the day before.

"He wouldn't go to the Meihi village. But he might go there." He realised with a jolt. "Because it's cold on the mountain and no fool except me would come looking for him in the dark, when it's freezin'

enough to make your fingers drop off. I must be the crazy one — but I guess that's all right. Crazy is better than traitor, so I'll take it."

He pulled himself up onto the next ledge, glancing up at the stars to get his bearings, and as he did so, something reached out of the darkness, dropping a heavy hand down on his shoulder. Maichu yelped, spinning around as he struggled to gather his wits. His hand went instinctively to his sword hilt, but even as he prepared to fight, he found he could make out his companion's pallor in the soft moonlight, and he sighed, dropping his hand.

"Hyoushin-sama." He murmured. "Shit, sir, you scared the life out of me."

"What are you doing here of all places, at this time of night?" Hyoushin asked softly, a question in the amethyst eyes. "It's a dangerous path, Maichu — only a fool would attempt it in the darkness."

"I'm a fool, then. And crazy too, I think." Maichu said frankly. "But I'm not a traitor, sir. And that's why I came here. To find you and tell you that."

Hyoushin's eyes widened in surprise, and at his hesitation, Maichu unhooked the heavy left-handed sword from his belt, holding it out.

"This is yours." He added. "Kayu took the Shinzahou, but I thought you might need this, now things are as they are."

Wordlessly Hyoushin took the sword from his companion's grip, then he raised his gaze to the young soldier. Maichu smiled, suddenly feeling awkward.

"I guess I'll be in some shit when Kayu and the rest realise I've gone." He added. "But it's done now. I don't believe you're a traitor, sir — I told you that before, and I mean it now. Someone's trying to set you up, that's all. And I'm not so much of a fool that I'd fall for it. I know you better than that."

Hyoushin stared at him for a moment. Then, much to Maichu's surprise, the look in the amethyst eyes softened into something which almost equalled a smile.

"Well." He said quietly. "And you have made your choice to come after me, Shi Maichu? Despite the danger, you have sought me out to tell me this?"

"Yes." Maichu agreed. "I'm not going back, either. You're my Commander. And I'm sticking with you — whatever that means."

He shivered as a cold wind whipped around them, and at the sight of it, Hyoushin frowned. Then he slipped his sword back into its customary position at his side, taking the young soldier by the arm and leading him across the snow towards the shelter of the cave. As they stepped inside, Maichu registered the flame torch glowing in one of the alcoves, and as Hyoushin gestured for him to sit down, he watched the Meihi kick together some dry twigs and leaf litter from the cavern floor, taking the torch from its sconce as he lowered the burning wood to light a fire.

“It will be warmer here.” He said quietly. “The cold is no problem for me, but I do not want to see you expire of hypothermia. Even if you have done something reckless by coming here. That letter bore the Imperial seal — to disobey its command is treason.”

“The letter didn’t say anything about following you.” Maichu said evenly. “Besides, I don’t think the Emperor had anything to do with that letter, Hyoushin-sama. I think it was a set-up job and that he knows nothing about it. Because Kintsusei-sama is a soldier and he has honour. He wouldn’t just evict you like that without at least giving you a chance to explain yourself to him. He’s not that way. So... I think that letter was a fake. And I’m sticking with what I know isn’t.”

Hyoushin sat back against the wall of the cave, and for a moment he didn’t speak. Then he nodded.

“It will be dangerous, to ally yourself with me.” He murmured. “I also believe there was something untoward behind that message. I do not know if the Emperor did or did not authorise it — but I do know that everything is not as it should be in Kutou at the present time. I have tried to make contact, and have been unable to. And if I am now marked as a traitor, I am probably also marked for death. Miramu would like nothing better than to hunt me down — to come with me would be to put yourself in the line of fire from both Kutou’s authorities and the assassin of the West.”

“I don’t care.” Maichu said firmly. “I trained to face danger, didn’t I? I’m a soldier, I’m not a girl, sir. And I believe in you. You’re not the traitor. Besides... Suiko told me something, when she gave me your sword. She said that Kikei is a Hin. Which means he’s tribal too — doesn’t it?”

“*Suiko* gave you my sword?” Hyoushin’s eyebrow arched at this, and Maichu nodded.

“She said she wanted to help you, but she was tied because the Shinzahou and the scale are in Kutou and under other people’s

control.” He agreed. “But she asked me to bring it to you. And I’d already made up my mind to find you, so I agreed. She doesn’t believe you’re a traitor either. She said you were one of the few people who still believed in Kutou, and because of it she had faith in you.”

“I see.” A flicker of comprehension flared in Hyoushin’s clever eyes, and he nodded. “Of late she has tried to warn me of danger. I should, perhaps, have listened to her more closely. But, I confess, I had my own concerns and I allowed them to — somewhat — cloud my judgement.”

He sighed, spreading his hands.

“As for her assertion, she is correct.” He added. “I do not know how she came by the information, because even I should not know of Kikei’s true origins. It was a confidence the Emperor took me into — he is the only one who, officially, is aware of Kikei’s Hin past.”

“But then... isn’t he... Toroki’s prediction...” Maichu trailed off, and Hyoushin nodded.

“Most likely.” He agreed. “My only preoccupation has been whether or not Toroki’s prediction truly held merit, or whether, as you said, it was delivered simply for the benefit of deceiving us.”

“Aoi believed in it.” Maichu remembered gravely. “He said that the things she predicts are real.”

“Aoiketsu.” Hyoushin’s expression became thoughtful, then he nodded his head.

“You are determined to follow me, Maichu, despite the danger?” He asked softly. Maichu nodded his head.

“Yes, sir.”

“I may be unable to afford you much — or any protection, if that is your wish.”

“You’ve trained me not to need protection.” Maichu said firmly. “Aoi aside, I’m as good as any of the others. Better’n some. I’m all right. I’m not asking you to protect me. And I’m coming because I believe in Kutou, too. Like Suiko said. Like you do. I want to help my Emperor and my country. And I know you’re the last person who’d ever betray Kintsusei-sama.”

A faint smile touched Hyoushin’s lips.

“You have as much determination now as you did six years ago when I first asked you if you truly wished to be a soldier.” He

remembered, and Maichu reddened at the memory.

“That was a long time ago. I was green then.”

“True.” Hyoushin nodded. “But I have never regretted giving in to you, or allowing you to train with my men. You still have that resolute spirit that characterised you then, and I am glad to see it. If it is your will to accompany me, then I will not try and change your mind. You are a man and you can make your own decisions as regards your life, after all.”

“Then that’s settled.” Maichu shuffled closer to the fire, pulling his cloak more tightly around his body. “Shit, it really is cold up here.”

“Take this.” Hyoushin rummaged in a pile of rolled cloth, pulling out a heavy woollen cloak and holding it out. “It will help against the wind, and in the morning we will leave here.”

“Thanks.” Maichu took the object gratefully, wrapping it around his shoulders. “That’s better. This is warm stuff — where did you get it from, anyhow?”

“The Meihi on this mountain, with whom I apparently colluded.” Hyoushin said softly, and Maichu stared at him, seeing a glimmer of emotion in his companion’s violet gaze.

“Why *were* you on the mountain with them anyway, sir?” He asked hesitantly. “I mean, I know it ain’t any of my business, an’ I know it wasn’t about treason... so I shouldn’t really ask. But you... you gave in to Kayu’s babbling because you wanted to protect those people — didn’t you? An’ I just... wondered about it.”

Hyoushin frowned, closing his eyes for a moment, and with a jolt Maichu realised that his normally steady Commander was composing himself. For an instant, the Meihi seemed somehow fragile, and then, as he opened his eyes again, the moment was gone.

“You cannot understand the things that those people have already faced.” He said quietly. “I am glad you cannot. I hope that one day there will be a world in which no man will understand such things. The Meihi only ask to be left in peace to live their lives. They hurt noone. And I will not be the reason for them to suffer more harm.”

“Ouno said... you were with a... a woman there.” Maichu admitted awkwardly. “That Kayu saw... saw you.”

“I see.” The Meihi’s lips twitched into an ironic, humourless smile. “I can see in what direction your thoughts have gone. You are a good soldier, but far too interested in the licentious side of life. Not all men

are as you are, you know... you should not assume the worst."

"I... I'm sorry." Maichu reddened. "I didn't mean to be rude, or intrusive. I just... I..."

"She is my sister, Maichu." Hyoushin cut across him, and Maichu faltered, staring at him in surprise. Hyoushin nodded.

"Now you understand." He added. "I will not let harm come to her. Twenty-five years ago, when we were separated, I could not protect her. This time I will. No matter what."

"Your sister." Maichu breathed. "Shit, and I didn't even know you had a family. So that's why they gave you the Shinzahou? Because you're related to one of them?"

"I suppose it was." Hyoushin agreed.

"But Kayu has that now." Maichu frowned. "What are *we* going to do?"

"The answer to that should be clear." Hyoushin said evenly. "We are going to find your young friend, and discover what he knows about Kounan and their motives. Thanks to my mountain friends, I will be able to discard my armour and conceal myself as a member of my tribe — with any luck it will attract less attention that way, since I am sure you still have your merchant's attire from your previous trip to Kounan."

"Friend? You mean Aoi?" Maichu stared, and Hyoushin nodded.

"I encountered him also today." He said plainly. "In the place where the Shinzahou was concealed. He had the sword of Kounan's Emperor in his hand."

"Aoi did?" Maichu's eyes almost fell out of his head. Hyoushin nodded again.

"Coupled with your words, I am certain he has discovered something important." He agreed softly. "Possibly the treason we are only just beginning to unearth ourselves. It will be dangerous, but from what you have told me, I believe Aoiketsu may be closer to a solution than we are and we need his help. Besides, there is another thing which has become more significant in my mind than the Shinzahou. Suiko told me that we were on the wrong quest, and I think she's probably right. The girl from Kounan was also in Aoiketsu's company. And from things she said, it became clear that she was acquainted with Seiryuu's Miko, Hongou Yui."

"Which means what?" Maichu looked blank. "I'm sorry, sir, you'll

have to join the dots. My brain is too frozen to make sense of it.”

“Hongou Yui has not been to Kutou in eighteen years, Maichu.” Hyoushin said simply. “But the child — Sukunami Hikari — she isn’t even as old as you or Aoiketsu are. She is a girl of no more than fifteen or sixteen. There is no way she could have met Hongou Yui. Unless...”

He trailed off, and Maichu’s eyes widened.

“Shit!” He breathed. “She’s from the *Miko*’s friggin’ world?”

“That is my conjecture, yes.”

“But... if she... if she’s from... is she... *Suzaku no Miko*?”

“No.” Hyoushin shook his head. “That legend is over. I am sure of it. Whatever the girl thinks her role is or isn’t, I am certain she is not here to raise Suzaku. It is Kutou’s legend that requires closure, not Kounan’s. And Suiko did say that if we could assemble the four Shinzahou, Seiryuu no Miko would appear. Sukunami Hikari is in possession of — or knows the location of — Suzaku no Shinzahou. She more or less admitted as much before me. In light of this, Maichu, I am quite certain. The child may have been sent to Kounan, and she may be the daughter of Tamahome. But she is still from the Miko’s world. And she is still Seiryuu no Miko. She is the one who will save Kutou and the Emperor. And we must find her — before Kikei is able to.”

“Shit.” Maichu breathed. “*That’s* what Aoi’s discovered? That’s what he was afraid to tell me, in case it got to the wrong people?”

“I believe it possible.” Hyoushin nodded. “And more, that he has become her protector because he realises her importance to Kutou. He is a step ahead of us, and therefore a step ahead of Kikei and whatever it is he plans in the East. Clearly at present we cannot go to Kutou — I am concerned about the Emperor, but I do not believe anything will befall him until all the Shinzahou are gathered. In which case, we have a little time. And there is only one course of action open to us.”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“We must go to Kounan and negotiate with the South.” He said quietly. “And we *must* bring Seiryuu no Miko to Kutou — before it is too late.”

Genbu no Takara

::Owari::